



**PLAIN
MARY SMITH**
A Romance of
RED SAUNDERS

HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS

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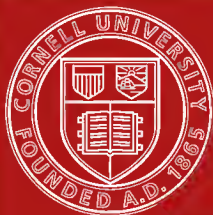
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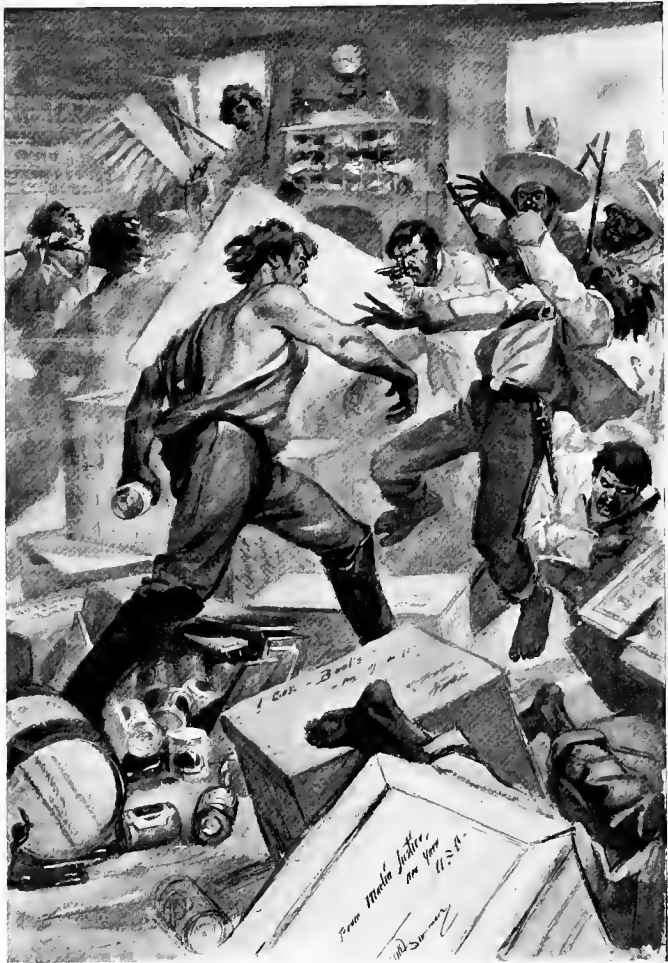
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Plain Mary Smith



"I grabbed cans of tomatoes, and panted the heap"

Plain Mary Smith

A Romance of Red Saunders

By
Henry Wallace Phillips

With Illustrations
By Martin Justice



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PLAIN MARY SMITH

PLAIN MARY SMITH

A ROMANCE OF RED SAUNDERS

I

“BUT WAS N'T IT A GORGEOUS SMASH!”

OLD Foster used to say the reason some women married men they entirely should not was because nature tried to even up all round. Very likely that 's it, but it 's a rocky scheme for the Little Results. When my mother married my father, it was the wonder of the neighborhood. I don't fully understand it to this day, as many things as I 've seen.

She was a beautiful, tall, kind, proud woman, who walked as if she owned the world and loved it; from her I get my French blood. Was there a dog got his foot run over? Here he comes for mother, hollering and whimpering,

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showing her the paw and telling her all about it, sure she 'd understand. And she did. 'Twixt her and the brutes was some kind of sympathy that did away with need of words. Doggy 'd look at her with eyebrows up and wigwag with his tail, "Left hind leg very painful. Fix it, but touch lightly, *if* you please."

Father was a gaunt, big man, black and pale; stormy night to her sunshine. A good man, estimated by what he did n't do (which is a queer way to figure goodness), but a powerful discourager on the active side. He believed in Hell first, last, and all the time; I think he felt some scornful toward the Almighty for such a weak and frivolous institution as Heaven. How much of this was due to his own nature, and how much to the crowd he traveled with, I don't know. He had to have it in him to go with them; still, I like to think they led him off. Left to mother's influence, he 'd have been a different man—more as I remembered him when I was a little chap. This "church" of his

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was down on everything that had a touch of color, a pleasant sound, or a laugh in it: all such was wickedness. I remember how I got whaled for kissing Mattie. A boy that would n't kiss Mattie if she 'd let him should have been trimmed to a peak. However, I got whaled for anything and everything. In this he was supported by his fellow church-members, most of 'em high-cheek-boned men with feverish eyes, like himself. “Take heed to the word, Brother Saunders,” they 'd say: “‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’” So father 'd refuse to spare the rod, and he 'd spoil me for the time being, anyhow.

They were n't all men of that stamp, though. You can't get a crowd of fools to hold together unless there 's a rascal to lead them. Anker was the boss of the business—and a proper coyote he was. A little man, him; long-nosed and slit-eyed; whispered, mostly, from behind his hand. He had it in for me, most particular. First place, I nicknamed him “Canker” and it

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stuck; next place, one day me and Tom, Mattie's brother, being then about sixteen apiece, come up from swimming and stopped at Anker's patch to pull a turnip. While we sat there, cutting off slices and enjoying it, never thinking of having harmed the man, Anker slides out to us, so quiet we could n't hear him till he was right there, and calls us a pair of reprobates and thieves. I never liked the sound of that word "thief." He got the turnip. He 'd have got worse, too, but Tom slung the sleeve of his shirt around my neck and choked me down.

The turnip sent him to grass. As he got up, smiling with half his mouth, and wiping turnip off his manly brow, "You 'll regret this, young man," says he; "some day you 'll be sorry for this."

Poor Tom had his hands full holding me. "Well, you 'd better run along," says he; "for if this shirt gives way, *you 'll* regret it to-day."

Anker was a man to give advice, generally.

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When he cast an eye on me, foaming and r'aring, he concluded he 'd take the same, for once, and ambled out of that.

He kept his word, though. He made me regret it. You 'd hardly believe a man near fifty years old would hold a grudge against a sixteen-year-old boy hard enough to lie about him on every occasion, and poison the boy's father's mind, would you? That 's the facts. He stirred the old man up by things he “really did n't like to tell, you know, but felt it his painful duty”—and so forth. Yes, sir; he made me regret it plenty. You might say he broke our home up. And so, if ever I meet that gentleman in the hereafter, above or below, him and me is going to have some kind of a scuffle—but shucks! There 's no use getting excited over it at my age. The good Lord's attended to his case all right, without any help from me.

In all kinds of little things mother and father were separated by miles.. Take the case of old Eli Perkins, the tin-peddler, for instance. Mo-

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ther used to love to buy things from Eli, to hear him bargain and squirm, trying his best to give you a wrong steer, without lying right out. "Well, now, Mis' Saunders," he 'd say, "I ain't sayin' *myself* thet thet pan is solerd tin; I 'm on'y repeatin' of what I bin tolt. I du' know es it *be* solerd tin; mebbe not. In thet case, of course, it ain't wuth nineteen cents, es I was sayin', but about, about . . . well, well, now! I 'll tell you what I 'll do, ma'am. I 'll say fourteen cents and a few of them Baldwins to take the taste out 'n my mouth—can't do no fairer than thet now, kin I? Yassam—well, nuthin' more *to-day*? Thankee, ma'am." And Eli 'd drive off, leav- ing mother and me highly entertained. But father 'd scowl when his eye fell on Eli. It seems that the poor old cuss was a child of the devil, because he would take Chief Okochohog- gammee's Celebrated Snaggerroot Indian Bit- ters for some trouble Eli felt drawing toward him and tried to meet in time. When Eli got

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an overdose of the chief's medicine he had one song. Then you heard him warble:

“Retur-n-n-n-i-n’ from mar-r-r-ket,
Thebutterneggsallsold,
And—will you be so kind, young man,
And tie ‘em up for *ME*?
Yaas I will, yaas I will, w’en we git UPon the hill.
And we joggled erlong tergether singin’
TOORAL-I-YOODLE-I-AAAAAAAAAAAAAY!!”

Well, sir, to hear it, and to see Eli, with his head bent back near to break off, his old billy-goat whisker wagging to the tune, was to obtain a pleasant memory. The way that “TOORAL-I-YOODLE-I-AY” come out used to start old Dandy Jim, the horse, on a dead run.

Another offspring of the same split-hoof parent was Bobby Scott, the one-legged sailor-man that used to whittle boats for us boys when he was sober, and go home from the tavern Saturday nights at the queerest gait you ever saw, playing his accordion and scattering pennies to the kids. I always liked any kind of

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music; pennies did n't come my way so often —how were you going to make me believe Old Bob was a wicked sinner? I did n't, nor that Eli was neither. I thought a heap of both of 'em.

But railroading was what gave me the first wrench from the home tree. It happened one evening I wandered over the hills to the end of the little jerk-line that ran our way, and watched the hostler put the engine in the shed for the night. It was a small tea-pot of an engine that one of our Western 'Guls could smear all over the track and never know there 'd been an accident, but, man! she looked big to me. And the hostler! Well, I classed him with the lad that hooked half-dollars out of the air at the Sunday-school show, and took a rabbit out of Judge Smalley's hat. But the hostler was a still more wonderful man. I tried to figure if he 'd ever speak to me, and what I should do if he did. Every time I got the chores done early, I skipped it over to the railroad, till

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finally the hostler he sees a long-legged boy eating him with his eyes, and he says:

“Hello, bub!”

I scuffed my feet and said, “Good morning.”

The hostler spit careful over the top of the switch and says, with one eye shut, “Like a ride?”

Well! !

Howsomever, it seemed manners to me to refuse all pleasant propositions, so I said “no” and prepared to slide away. But he was a wise man.

“Better come down to the shed,” he says. So I climbed aboard with no more talk.

“This is the throttle,” says he. “You pull that and she goes: try it.”

Notwithstanding I expected that engine to explode and scatter us the minute a strange hand was laid on her, I wrestled my nerve together and moved the lever a tiny bit. “Chow!” says the old engine, “Chow-chow-chow!” and I near had a fit with pride and

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scaredness. It *is* a great sensation to hold them big critters under your hand. I never knew an engineer yet that got rid of it entirely.

So there was me, white in the face with grandeur, hogging the engine into the shed. I could n't sleep much that night. When I did doze off, it was to travel a great many miles a minute on a road-bed laid flat against the side of a mountain, with an engine that had wash-tubs for drivers, and was run by winding up by a crank, like the old clock in the hall. Lord! how I whizzed around the turns! Grinding away like a lunatic, until the road ended—just ended, that 's all, and off we went into the air. From that on I had business at the railroad every evening I could get off.

I went over to my engine one night. There was n't a soul around. My friend was as ingenious a Yank as ever helped make this world a factory. He 'd got up a scheme for a brake, almost the identical thing with the air-brake they use to-day, except Jerry took pressure

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into his brake-pistons straight from the boiler. He spent every cent he had to get one made and put on his pusher. How he used to explain it to me, and tell me what we 'd do when he sold his patent! For he was a great friend of mine, Jerry was, and I knew the workings of that brake as well as he did himself. The reason he was n't around was that he 'd taken the pusher down the line to show his scheme to some railroad people. So there stood an engine all alone—the one I was used to, I thought—and it occurred to me there 'd be no particular harm if I got aboard and moved her up and down the track a foot or two—you see, I 'd never had her single-handed. So I started easy, and reversed her, and played around that way for a while, till naturally I got venture-some. One stunt that Jerry and I loved to try was to check her up short with his patent brake. The poor old pusher never got put to bed without being stood on end a half-dozen times; that suggested to me that I 'd slam her

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down on the shed doors and see how near I could come to them without hitting. I backed 'way off, set her on the corner, yanked the throttle, and we boiled for the shed, me as satisfied with myself as could be. I did n't leave much margin for stopping, so there was n't a lot of track left when I reached down for the brake-lever, and found—it was n't there! If some day you reach for something and find your right arm 's missing, you 'll know how I felt. In the little bit of time before the smash, there was n't a scrap of my brain working—and then, Holy Jeeroosalum! How we rammed that shed! The door fell over, cleaning that engine to the boiler; stack, bell, sand-box, and whistle lay in the dust, and all of the cab but where I sat. Quicker 'n lightning we bulled through the other end, and the rest of the cab left there. How it come I did n't get killed, I don't know—all that remained of the shed was a ruin, and that had a list to port that would have scart a Cape-Horner. I woke up then

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and threw her over kerbang, but she went into the bunker squirting fire from her drivers. I shut her down, took one despairing look, and says out loud, “I guess I ’ll go home.”

I felt about as bad as falls to the lot of man at any age. Jerry was sure to get into trouble over it; he ’d make a shrewd guess at who did it, whether I told or not, and his confidence in me would be a thing of the past—nothing but black clouds on the sky-line, whilst inside of me some kind of little devil was holler-ing all the time, “But was n’t it a gorgeous smash!”

I went home and to bed that night without speaking, resolved to let my misfortunes leak out when they got ready. That ’s the kind of resolution I ’ve never been able to keep—I ’ve got to face a thing, got to get it done with, swallow my medicine, and clean the table for a new deal.

Next morning I told father. You can imagine how easy it was—me stumbling and stut-

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tering while he sat there, still as if he 'd been painted for the occasion.

“Have you entirely finished?” says he, when the sound of my words hit my ears with such a lonesome feeling that I quit talking.

“Yes, sir,” I says, “that 's about all of it.”

“Well, William, I see you 're determined to make our name a disgrace through the community,” he begins again. That was out of whooping range from the truth. I had n't determined to do anything to our name, nor nothing else, when I got aboard that engine. Far from me had it been to determine anything, so I filed a protest.

“Why, father,” I says, “it was an accident—it was just as if you 'd hopped into a neighbor's wagon, not noticing the head-stall was n't on the horse, and the critter 'd run away, and things—” Here again I run down with a buzz. He was n't paying the least heed to the sense of what I said. It only interrupted him. He sailed right on, explaining how I was the most

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undiluted scoundrel of his acquaintance, an all-wool villain of the closest weave, built to hold sin like a Navajo blanket does water.

Now I understand that the old gentleman did think a lot of me, and, of course, wanted me to be as near like him as possible, as representing the highest style of man—it was his disappointment he poured on me, not his judgment. But then, I was sixteen by the clock, and I thought, of all the fool laying-outs I ’d heard, that crossed the rope an easy first.

I wanted to respect my father; you can’t guess how much I wanted to, but when he insisted on talking like Eli Perkins’s mule, it simply was n’t possible. He stood there, black and sullen, and I stood there, red and sullen.

“Get yourself ready to go with me,” he says, turns on his heel, and walks to the house, his hands clasped behind his back, and his big head leant forrard,—a fine, powerful chunk of a man, all right. Oh, Lord! What he could have been if he ’d listened to mother instead of

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Anker! There was n't a man in this county more respected, nor whose word was better thought of on any subject outside of his own family, and that hydrophobia of a doctrine of his. Honest? Why, he was the savings-bank of the place. All the old hayseeds around there turned their surplus in to him to take care of, instead of putting it in a sock,—and I want you to understand that the real old Yankee farmer, with tobacco juice on his whiskers, was a man you 'd fool just once in a lifetime, and you 'd sit up more 'n one night to figure how you got the best of it, then.

Well, down him and me goes to the railroad office, and I have to tell my tale. I begged hard to be allowed to leave Jerry out of it, but no—that would n't do: it would be a lie. I always stood ready to lie to any extent to help a friend. I think that hurt me worse than the rest of it.

After some parleying around the offices, we were shown up into a private room. There sat three men, officers of the company, and Jerry.

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My father made few words of his part, simply saying he stood prepared to pay all damages, although he could ill afford it, and that I would tell the story.

First off, I was embarrassed, but soon I was flying my arms around, and letting 'em know all about it, as if we 'd played together for years.

Two of those men had been boys once; they had an almighty hard job to keep an official face on, as some of my interest in engineering, and my satisfaction in having made a corking old bust-up of her while I was at it, crept into my discourse. The third man was in an ugly state of liquor. He let out on me, although the others said, “Come! Come!” Father's face was something to look at when he saw the only man that sided with him was three-quarters loaded.

After giving me a blast, this bucko, who I believe was president of the company, kind of falls over on his desk and opens up on Jerry,

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while my heart broke entirely. He was about as reasonable toward Jerry as my father had been toward me. The other two bit their lips, as if they were n't going to stand for a whole lot more; everybody that knew Jerry, liked him.

Howsomever, Jeremiah was a prophet in his own country. He belonged to that tribe of Yankees that don't seem to be born very fast these days, but long may they wave! the good-natured, able kind that feared the face of no man nor the hoof of no jackass, and always had something to say that wrecked the situation.

He walks carefully over to the side of the room to where the spittoon was, so 's he could talk with freedom, and sidles easily back again, and says he, "Mr. Hawkins, you 've lit on me like a sparrow-hawk. If I thought you was in condition to make a speech, I 'd feel tolerable cast down. As it is, I advise you to go out and take another snifter,—I appeal from Cæsar

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drunk to Cæsar drunker.” Well, sir, those other two let out a yell and fell on the floor; the old president, he r’ars up with massacre in his eye for a minute, and then it got the best of him.

“Shut your noise, you damn fools,” says he to the others; then to Jerry, “With the loan of your arm, I ’ll fill your prescription.” So off he toddles to the door. When he got there he turned around, and fixed upon my father a stern but uncertain eye.

“*I ’m* drunk with liquor, sir,” says he, “and there ’s recovery in that case; but *you ’re* drunk on your own virtue,—may God have mercy on your soul! Take the boy home and use him right,—there is no bill to pay.”

II

“THE VILLAGE PRIDE”

WELL, mother gave me a long talking to, after that. Not scolding, but conversation, just as if I was a human being. Somehow it 's easier to get along with me that way.

I reckon I averaged three sessions a week in the woodshed, but father might as well have walloped a lime-kiln, for all the tears he drew out of me.

Yet let mother talk to me in her quiet way—easy and gentle, the words soaking in, and the first thing you knew, I had a lump in my throat, and some blamed thing got in my eyes.

I wanted to do what was right by all of them, I certainly did. It was a misfit all round, there 's where the trouble come. Father

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could n't possibly enter into my feelings. Sixteen I was, staggering with strength, red-headed, and aching to be at something all the time. It ain't in reason I could remember to put one foot before the other—right-left, right-left, day in and day out.

Then, as soon as I 'd cleaned up all the boys in our place, every young man for miles around who made pretensions to being double-handed came to find what I was made of.

It 's all right to say don't fight, but when this young man slouched along and cast disparagin' eyes in my direction, it was plain somebody had to be hurt, and it might as well not be me.

Honest, I 'd rather have been in the woods, fishing, or just laying on my back, watching the pines swinging over me, so slow, so regular, tasting the smell of 'em, and fancying I was an Injun or Mr. Ivanhoe, or whatever idee was uppermost at the time, than out in the dusty road, smiting my fellow-man. But if you should be mean enough to ask me if I took no

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pleasure in the art of assault and battery, I 'd have to admit a slight inclination.

Not that I wanted to hurt anybody, either—small malice there was in those mix-ups! I reckon, with the other lad, as with me, it was more a case of doing your little darnedest—of letting out all you held, once in so often—that made the interest.

But father was powerful opposed to scrap-ping, and, of course, mother did n't like it, neither. The only place a woman likes a row is in a book.

Women is fond of bargains. They like a fine fight with no bills to pay.

It was a little that way with mother. This time she was talking to me, she brought up for my instruction Great-grandfather Saunders, who fought in the Revolution. He was one of 'em that clubbed their muskets at Bunker Hill. When they asked the old man about it afterward he said he acted that way because he was too darned scart to run. Howsomever, he was

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a fair-to-medium quarrelsome old gentleman when his blood was up. Mother carefully explained to me that was different—*he* was fighting for his country. Yet, at the same time, I recollect seeing a letter the old man wrote, calling his neighbors a lot of rum-swilling, psalm-singing hypocrites. Now a man's neighbors are his country. I think Grandpa Saunders liked a row, myself.

Next, mother told me about my French forebears, and a nice peaceful lot they were, for sure. The head of the outfit—the Sieur De La Tour—sassed the king himself to his teeth—he did n't care no more about a king than I do—unless it happened to match on a two-card draw. There was some racket about a friend of Many-times-great-grandfather De La Tour's offending the king. He took refuge with the old man, while the king sent the sheriff after him. “You must yield him to the king!” says the sheriff. “Not to any king under God!” says Many-times-great-grandfather De

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La Tour. Hence, trouble. My! How mother's eyes shone when she repeated that proud answer. Yet suppose I sassed father like that? There 's something about distance lending enchantment to the view. Well, they downed the old man, although he stacked the posse around him in great shape. Meantime his friend was using both feet to acquire some of that distance to lend enchantment to the view, I just spoke of.

One thing stuck out in these old-timers. Whatever their faults might be, meanness was n't one of 'em. Therefore I indorsed the lot. I left her that day determined to be such a son as anybody would be proud of. Why, in half an hour's time I was wondering how I could make the virtuous jobs last. Already my chest swelled, as I see myself pointed to on the street as a model boy.

My first stagger at being the Village Pride come off next day—Sunday. It would take a poet to describe how much I did n't like Sunday, and a large, black-whiskered poet, at that.

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Man! Sitting in that little old church of a warm day, with the bees bumbling outside, and all kinds of smells coaxing, coaxing me to the woods, and a kind of uneasy, dry feeling of the skin, that only the water-hole by the cider-mill could cure. Then to know, too, that the godless offspring of the unregenerate were at that minute diving from the dam—chow!—into the slippery cool water—and me the best diver in the crowd. . . .

I wriggled, squirmed my fingers into knots, and let my fancy roam. Roaming fancy was my one amusement in church.

We had the kind of minister who roars one minute and whispers the next. I always imagined he shouted as loud as he dared, short of waking the baby. I never was done being surprised, after he 'd hissed the conclusion through his teeth in a way that should have sent chills down your backbone, to hear him rattle off a bunch of notices as fast as he could talk.

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I could n't get interested in the sermon, so my mind wandered. At times an elephant sneaked through the back door and blew a barrel of water down the preacher's back. Then there was the monkey. He skipped gaily from pew to pew, yanking the women's bonnets off, pulling the men's hair, hanging from the roof-beams by his tail, and applying a disrespectful thumb to his nose. That elephant and monkey got to be as real as anything. Sometimes they 'd jump into life when I was n't thinking of 'em at all.

This Sunday, however, I made a manful stand against temptation. As soon as the elephant peeked through the door, I took a long breath and forced him out. I did n't let the monkey much more 'n bob his head over Deacon Anker's pew, although one of my pet delights was when he grabbed the deacon's top-knot and twisted it into a rope.

And my reward for an honest try was to listen to as lovely a tale of treachery and un-

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ladylike behavior as I can remember. The sermon was about a Mrs. Jael. She took in one of the enemy, fed him fine, and while he was asleep, grabbed a hammer and a railroad spike and nailed him to the floor by his head. Whilst I was revolving in my mind how, and on what person, I could best apply these teachings, another thought occurred to me.

“Mother!” I whispers, pulling her sleeve.

“Sssh!” says she; “what is it, Will?”

“You never could have done that,” I says.

She squeezed my hand and whispered back, “You ’re right, Will,” with an approving smile.

“No,” says I, still full of my discovery, “you ’d have pounded your thumb.”

Her face went ten different ways and then she snorted right out. It was a scandal. It took her so by surprise she could n’t get the best of it, so we two had to leave the church. When we got outside she sat down and laughed for five minutes.

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“Whatever does possess you to say such things?” she says. “It was dreadful!”

Next day father patted me on the back with a nice limber sapling, for misbehavior in church. This caused the first show of rebellion I ever saw in mother.

She came out to the woodshed when court was in session.

“I ’d like to speak to you a minute,” she says to father.

“I have no time now,” he answers short.

“I ’d like to speak to you a minute,” repeats mother: there was a hint of Many-times-great-grandfather De La Tour in her tones. Father considered for a minute; then laid down the club and went out. First they talked quietly. Next, I heard mother—not because she spoke loud, but because there was such a push behind the words:

“I am as much a culprit as he is,” she says; “why not use the whip on me?”

Father talked strong about being master in

“The Village Pride”

his own house, and like that. It was bluff—boy that I was, I caught the hollow ring of it. Yet mother changed her tone instantly. She turned gently to argument. “You *are* the master,” she says; “but would you make your own son a slave? Why do you treat mistakes as crimes? Why do you expect a man’s control in a sixteen-year-old boy? I have never asked for much, but now I ask—”

They walked so far away I could n’t hear what she asked. I did n’t care. She was on my side; I ’ll swear I did n’t feel the ridges on my back.

When father returned and said, “Well, you can go now,” I left that woodshed a happy boy.

I made up my mind even stronger to be a monument of behavior. Whether it was mother’s talk, or that I did really keep out of scrapes, at least I got through the week without a thrashing.

Then come Sunday again. My Sunday-school teacher was a maiden lady by the name

Plain Mary Smith

of Mehitabel Demilt—aunt to Thomas F., my present partner. Miss Hitty was n't much to look at. Growing her nose had absorbed most of her vitality, and her years was such she could have looked on a good part of mankind right motherly, if she 'd been inclined that way. Howsomever, she wore the styles of sweet sixteen, and whenever a man come around she frisked like a clothes-horse.

But a kinder woman never lived. When with the boys she dropped her tomfoolery, too. Trouble was, them young clothes stood for all she dreamt of—give them dreams the go-by, and the race was lost for poor Miss Hitty. Feathers flyin' and ribbons streaming, she made herself believe she was still in the running; without 'em, she knew only too well what it was to be a lonely, long-nosed, forsaken, homely old maid. I don't blame her a particle. Her finery stood to her like whisky to a busted man. Take a little wine for your stomachache, and a few clothes for your heartache.

“The Village Pride”

A trifle gay for father's crowd was Miss Hitty, but they did n't dast to say a word. She belonged to one of our best families, and her brother-in-law, who could be as ungodly a man under provocation as you ever see, held a mortgage on the church. He 'd 'a' dumped the outfit into the snows of winter, and never a second thought, if they did n't treat Miss Hitty right. So they overlooked things and gave her the Bible class to run. Mighty nice to us boys she was; she certainly was. Curious mix of part child and part horse-sense woman. The woman savvied her place all right, but the child part could n't stand for the pain of it.

If there was anything that made Miss Hitty warlike it was cruelty. Seems the Mrs. Jael sermon riled her plumb through. I suppose, perhaps, she did n't understand how any woman could be so recklessly extravagant as to drive a nail through a sound man's head, and spoil him. Miss Hitty might have spiked his coat-tails to the floor, but his head? Never.

Plain Mary Smith

Joshing aside, she beat the tom-tom over that sermon, giving us boys a medicine talk that sticks still: how we were all fools not to make the earth as pleasant as we could, so long 's we got to live here. It seemed reasonable. I thought about it all that night, trying to find a subject to make better and happier, as Miss Hitty said.

Before I went to sleep I 'd located my victim. First thing in the morning I went and told mother all about it. You know I 'm medium enthusiastic over what I 'm going to do, so I was laying it off to her in great shape, when I brought up short, seeing her eyes full of tears. I plumped down and hugged her.

“What 's the matter? I did n't mean to make you cry,” I says, feeling it was my luck to do the wrong thing, and not half try.

“I 'm not crying, little boy,” she says; “I 'm only one of those ladies in the books who don't want their true-loves to go to war.” She kissed me. We often used to play parts of

“The Village Pride”

those books, so I took it just as she said, thinking it astonishing how well she acted the part; not much realizing what it meant to a mother who loved her boy, and knew he meant no harm, to have him clubbed all the time. But she shook off the tears right away.

“Arise!” says she, laughing, and putting a flower in my coat. “Arise, Sir William of the Hot Heart! Go thy way and conquer.”

So I giggled and looked simple, give her one of them boys’ kisses that would come under the head of painful operations to anybody but a mother, and skipped, as graceful as legs four foot long would permit, to my new job.

III

SANDY GRAY

THE saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," ought n't to be taken too literal. For instance, if Foster was sick abed, nothing could please him more than reading about how Professor So-and-so had mixed a little of this acid and a squirt of that other truck, and found out what his highly esteemed friend Herr Doctor Professor Schmittygeshucks said about the results was n't true at all. And such thrilling stories. Week on end you could feed Fos that and keep him happy. Now, when Fos boiled this stuff down to my understanding, I was interested, too; but, right off the bat, I should n't care for it if I was sick. I 'd rather hear something

Sandy Gray

about the beauteous maid and her feller. Or a tune on the guitar. Or a little chin concerning the way Baldy Smith tried to play six cards in a jack-pot, and what happened to Baldy almost instantly afterward. No, sir, you can't stick too close to doing what you 'd like to have done to you, because tastes differ.

The foundation on which I put my plan for increasing human happiness was the queerest little cuss you ever did see. A kid about twelve years old, who looked to be a hundred and ten even before Sammy Perkins shot his eye out and shrunk him up on one side. It was an accident, of course. Sammy 'd saved nigh a year, till he had three dollars and seventy-five cents gathered in a heap to buy a bored-out army musket. Then he invited Sandy Gray to go with him; they started to rid the country of wild critters. They walked and they walked, but Heaven mercifully preserved the rabbits. So it become time for lunch, and also Sandy was now an Injun, whilst Sammy was Iron-

Plain Mary Smith

jawed Pete, the Nightmare of the Red Man. Iron-jawed Pete says to Chief Sandy Eaglebird, "Pick up chips! Make a fire!" But the haughty soul of the noble savage riz at the notion. Be darned if he 'd pick up chips. "All right," says Iron-jawed Pete, "then I 'll shoot you." And, the gun not being loaded, he promptly blew Sandy full of bird-shot. I 've heard about these wonderful destroyers—cannon a quarter of a mile long, that shoot bullets the size of hogsheads with force enough to knock a grasshopper off a spear of wheat at twenty-three and one third miles; and while I 'm somewhat impressed, I can't but feel there 's nothing like the old-fashioned, reliable, unloaded gun. Who ever heard of man, woman, or child missing with a gun that was n't loaded? If I was a leader of a forlorn hope in particularly sad conditions, I 'd say to my trusty men, "Boys, them guns ain't loaded," and instantly close a contract at so much a ton for removing the remnants of the enemy.

Sandy Gray

It cost Sammy's father many a dollar to square it with Gray's folks. They were a hard outfit, anyhow—what is called white trash down South. The father used to get drunk, come home, break the furniture, and throw the old woman out of the house; that is, if she did n't happen to be drunk at the time. In the last case, he come home, got the furniture broke on him, and was thrown out of the house.

It was n't an ideal home, like Miss Doolittle is always talking about. The kids gave Sandy a wide berth after the shooting, but my sympathies went out to him. He was a good opening, you see. I want to state right here, though, it was n't all getting my name up. All my life I 've had a womanish horror of men or animals with their gear out of order. I 'd walk ten mile to dodge a cripple. And this here Sandy, with his queer little hop, and his little claw hands, and his twist to one side, and his long nose, and his little black eyes, and his black hair hanging in streaks down on his yaller and

Plain Mary Smith

dirt-colored face, looked like nothing else on earth so much as a boiled pet crow.

When I jumped over the Grays' back fence, I see my friend Sandy playing behind the ruin they called a barn. Execution was the game he played. He had a gallows fixed up real natural. Just as I come up he was hanging a cat.

“The Lord have mercy on your soul!” squeaks Sandy, pulling the drop. Down goes the cat, wriggling so natural she near lost a half a dozen of her lives before I recovered enough to interfere. I resisted a craving to kick Mr. Sandy over the barn, and struck in to amuse him at something else. First off, he hung back, but by and by I had him tearing around lively, because we were aboard ship with a storm coming up to port, a pirate to sta'bbud, breakers forrud, and a rocky coast aft. Anybody would step quick under them conditions. So Sandy he moseyed aloft and hollered down the pirates was gaining on us, the storm approaching fast, the breakers

Sandy Gray

breaking worse than ever, and the rock-bound coast holding its own. I hastily mounted three cord-wood cannon, reefed the barn door, and battened down the hatches in the chicken-coop, without a hen being the wiser.

We were in the most interesting part when an unexpected enemy arrived on the scene, in the person of Sandy's mother, and did us in a single pass. She saw him up in the tree; she give me one glare and begun to talk.

I climbed the fence and went home. All the way back I felt this was a wicked and ungrateful world. The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. I wanted to get to my own room without mother's seeing me, but she came to the head of the stair when I was half up. "Well, son," she says, smiling so it did n't seem quite such a desert, "how did you make out with the little Gray boy?"

"Oh, not anything special," says I, airily, hoping to pass by.

"Come in and tell me," she says. So I went

Plain Mary Smith

in, hedging at first, but limbering up when she stroked my hair. Finally my wrongs come out hot and fast. I told about his hanging the cat, and made it as bad as I could. I enlarged upon the care and pains I spent in leading him into better ways.

“And, then,” says I, “just as we were having a good time, that mother of his comes out. And what do you suppose she says?”

Mother rubbed her hand over her mouth, swallowed once or twice, and managed to look as serious as anything. “I can’t imagine,” she answers; “you tell me.”

I shook my finger. “Can I say exactly what that woman said?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” says I, imitating Mrs. Gray, voice and all—voice like a horse-fiddle, head stuck front, and elbows wide apart—“well,” I says, “she looked up the tree and saw Sandy. ‘Sandy Gra-a-y!’ she hollers; ‘Sandy Gray!

Sandy Gray

You one-eyed, warp-sided, nateral-born fool! What you mean, playing with that Bill Saunders? You come in this house quick, afore you git you' other gol-damn eye knocked out!' ”

Mother dropped her sewing and had a fit on the spot. That made me mad for a minute. Then I laughed, too.

“Don't give up, Will,” says mother. “It takes time to learn to do the right thing. You kiss your mother and forget all about it—you did n't want Mrs. Gray to pay you for amusing Sandy, anyway, did you?”

“Of course not,” I replies. “But she need n't of . . . Darn him, he was hanging a cat!”

Mother went off the handle again.

“Perhaps you *like* people who hang cats?” I says, very scornful, the sore spot hurting again.

“Now, Will, don't be silly!” says mother. “Try again; think how funny it would have

Plain Mary Smith

seemed to you, if it had happened to any one else.”

“That ’s so,” I admits, my red hair smoothing down. “Well, I ’ll try again; but no more Sandy Grays.”

IV

THE FIGHT

THE next day my friend Mrs. Gray way-laid father, and told him fervently she did n't want me teachin' her Sandy none of my fool tricks.

And the old gentleman read me the riot act trimmed me to a peak, by word of mouth. There 's where me and righteous conduct near parted company. I 'm afraid I sassed the old man a little. I was awful sore, you know. Anyway, it wound up unpleasant. Father would n't listen to my side, as usual, and I 'll leave it to any man that 's tried to do the right thing and had it explode with him to realize how I felt. Boys have feelings. There 's lots of folk don't believe it, but I 've studied boys

Plain Mary Smith

to a certain extent, and I 'm willing to bet small sums they 're almost like persons in that respect.

I got ugly under the pressure. Then I beat the head near off Anker's slimy little whelp, as the only relief in sight. That was dead wrong. He was 'way smaller 'n me, and had n't done nothing at the time to deserve it. I went on father's principle that although no immediate cause was visible, yet there was plenty in the past and future to lick him for, so I lammed his both eyes black, bunged up his nose, and sent him hollering home. He met our school-teacher on the way. Mr. Judson and I come together fairly regular, yet we liked each other. He was a square man, Samuel Judson, and he knew kids from thirty years' experience. He never made but one mistake with me, and he come out and begged my pardon before the whole school for that. Father sneered at his doing it—saying a teacher ought to uphold discipline, and to beg a boy's pardon was just in-

The Fight

viting all kinds of skulduggery. Howsoever, Sammy Judson won me by that play. When he put the gad on me it was with the best of feelings on both sides. I can see the old lad now, smiling a thin little smile, sort of sarcastic, yet real kind underneath, whilst he twiddled the switch in his hands.

“Just let me trim a certain amount of foolishness out of you, and you ’ll make a fine man—a *fine* man, William,” he ’d say. And perhaps you think that small thin gentleman did n’t know how to make a hickory bite! He could get every tender spot, by instinct.

Well, he met young Mr. Anker, as I was saying, and asked him what ailed him. Algy explained the foul way I treated him, careful not to let the tale lose anything.

“Ah!” says Sammy, “and what was this for?”

“For nothing at all—not a thing!”

Sammy looks at him from under his shaggy eyebrows. “I ’ve often longed to thrash you

Plain Mary Smith

for that same reason," says he, and marches on.

But lovely Peter! Father handed me back my mistreating Algy with interest on the investment. Pheeew! And talk! I was the most cowardly brute in the country—to assault and batter a poor, nice, gentlemanly little boy—a great big hulking scoundrel like myself—why, it passed all crimes in history. Old Uncle Nero scratching the fiddle, while the fire-insurance companies tore their hair, was a public benefactor compared to me.

That passed. I was only hindered, not stopped, in my reckless career of Village Pride. I 'm a kind of determined cuss. But Fate sprung a stuffed deck on me. I did a piece of reforming really worth doing, but it cost me my home. Moreover, I was perfectly innocent of the intention. Don't it beat the devil? To tell it longhand, the play come up like this:

We had a party in our town who deserved a

The Fight

statue in the Hall—Mary Ann McCracken by name. She was a Holy Terror. Never before nor since have I seen anything like Mary Ann. I reckon she had about sixty years to her credit, and two hundred pounds to show for 'em. She ran a dairy up on the hill, doing her own milking and delivering, with only one long-suffering man to help out. I always remember that man walking around with one hand flying in the air, talking 'to himself, but when Miss Mary Ann said in her bass voice, "Pete! You Pete!" "Yessum, yessum!" says Pete as polite as possible.

The old lady used to bend slowly toward you, as if taking aim with her nose, and she fired her remarks through and through you. She 'd sprung a plank somewhere, and had a little list to the side, but not at all enough so she could n't take care of her own business and any other body's that come her way. When she went by father's house she used to roar, "Hark, froom the toomb—a doooleful sound!"

Plain Mary Smith

because she hated everything concerning father's church, from the cellar to the lightning-rod. One day she was talking to mother, that she happened to like, snorting scornful, as was her custom, when father had the bad luck to appear on the scene.

"Adele Delatter," says Mary Ann, "what made you marry that man?" pointing a finger at father like a horse-pistol. "What made you marry him, heh? heh? Don't you answer me. Hunh. He ain't got blood in his veins at all; he turns decent vittels to vinegar. Hah. His mother's milk curddled in his stum-mick." She humped up her back and shook both fists. "He orter married *me!*" says she; "I 'd 'a' fixed him! He 'd orter married *ME!*" She b'iled over entirely and galloped for the gate. "I 'd wring his cussed neck, if I stayed a minute longer!" she hollers. When she got in the wagon she rumbled and "pah'd" and "humphed." Then she stuck her red face out and yelled, "Orter married me. *I 'd give*

The Fight

him all the hell he needed! Pah, pish, yah! Git out o' here, Jacky hoss, before you take to singin' hymns!"

She 's the only human being I ever met that did just exactly what he, she, or it sweetly damned pleased to do. In that way, she 's restful to remember. Most of us have got to copper, once in a while; but nothing above, below, nor between ever made her hedge a mill.

Well, I was walking home from Sunday-school with Miss Hitty one Sunday, trying to get points on my new system, when who should we see bearin' down the street, all sails set and every gun loaded, but Miss Mary Ann McCracken! The first blast she give us was:

"Ha, Mehitabel! Gallivantin' around with the boys, now that the men 's give out, hey?"

Poor little Miss Hitty was flummexed foolhardy. She stuttered out some kind of answer, instead of breakin' for home.

"Oh, my! my! my!" says Mary Ann, not paying the least attention to Miss Hitty's re-

Plain Mary Smith

marks. "My!" says she, "you 'd ought to shuck them clothes. What you wastin' your time on boys fur? You was always hombly, Hitty; yes, but you 're clean—I 'll say that for you—you 're *clean*. You stand some chance yet. You git married and shuck them clothes—*but shuck them clothes anyhow!*"

You could have heard her to Willet's Mountain. And away she flew.

Miss Hitty cried all the way home. I did my best to comfort her, but Mary Ann jabbed deep. She was child entirely when we reached her front door, and she turned to me just like a child.

"*Must* I wear different clothes, Will?" she says.

"Not a darn bit," says I. "Not for all the jealous, pop-eyed old Jezebels in ten townships."

She stood a moment, relieved, but still doubtful. "I don't know but what I *should*," she said. Then I got in the argument that went



“You git married and shuck them clothes’”

The Fight

every time, on every question, in those parts. “Why, Miss Hitty!” I says, “how you talk! Think of the cost of it!”

She was so grateful she threw both arms and her parasol around my neck and kissed me then and there. “I won’t!” she says, stamping her foot, “I won’t! I won’t!” and she swept into the house real spirited, like a high-strung mouse.

So it come I was Miss Hitty’s champion.

Algy Anker happened to see Miss Hitty kiss me, and, of course, I heard from it. All the gay wags in town took a fly out of me. Even old Eli led me mysteriously to one side and whispered he believed in helping young fellers, so, when I was getting my outfit—he winked—why, he ’d make a big reduction in tinware. I stood most of the gaffing pretty well, although I could n’t stop at any place without adding to the collection of rural jokes, but at last one man stepped over the line that separates a red-head from war.

Plain Mary Smith

There was always a crowd of country loafers around the tavern. A city loafer ain't like a country loafer. The city loafer is a blackguard that ain't got a point in his favor, except that he 's different from the country loafer.

One day I had to go by the tavern and I see Mick Murphy tilted back in his chair, hat over eyes, thumbs in suspenders; big neck busting his shirt open, big legs busting through the pants' legs, big feet busting through the ends of his curved-up shoes, and a week's growth of pig-bristles busting out of his red face. Mick was the bold bully of the rough crowd—fellers from twenty to twenty-five. He worked till he got money enough to buy whisky, then he got drunk and licked somebody.

The course of such lads is pretty regular. Mick was about a year from robbing hen-roosts. Next to hen-roosts comes holding up the lone farmer. Then the gang gets brash entirely, two or three are killed, and the rest land in the pen. You would n't believe hardly what

The Fight

kiddish minds these ignorant, hulking brutes have sometimes, nor how, sometimes, they come to the front, big, bigger than life-size. A painter would n't waste a minute putting down Mick Murphy as a thing of beauty. Little bits of eyes, near hid with whisky bloat; big puffy lips, stained with tobacco juice till they looked like the blood was coming through; dirty-handed, dirty-clothed, and dirty-mouthed—yah! And still—well, when I remember how that bulldozer went up a burning flight of stairs, tore a burning door off with them big dirty hands, and brought a little girl down through a wallow of flames, taking the coat off his back to wrap around her, and how the pride of the man come out when the mother stumbled toward him, calling on God to reward him, and he straightened under the pain and said, “Ah, that 's all right, ledy! 'F your ol' man 'll stand a drink an' a new shirt we 'll call it square.” The son-of-a-gun never left his bed for six weeks—why, he was broiled all down

Plain Mary Smith

one side—why, when I remember that, I can't call up such a disgust for old Mick.

As I said, I see Mick Murphy leaning back in his chair at the tavern. Of course, he had a word to say about me and Miss Hitty. Now, the bare sight of Mick used to make the hair stand up on the back of my neck and growls boil inside of me. I just naturally disliked that man. So I sassed him plenty. He got mad and threatened to slap my face. I sassed him more, and he *did* slap my face. In one twenty-fifth of a second I caught him on his rum-bouquet and sent him plumb off his feet—not bad for a sixteen-year-old, when you consider the other party was an accomplished rough-houser. Yes, sir, he went right down, clean, more from the quickness than the stuff behind the blow, as I had n't anywheres near grew into my strength yet. The tavern crowd set up a roar, and then jumped to interfere, for Mick he roared, too, and made to pull me apart. The onlookers would n't stand for it. They were n't

The Fight

such high-toned gents, but a contest between a leggy kid and a powerful man looked too far off the level.

“You run,” says one fellow to me. “We ’ll hold him.” But hanged if I was going to run. My thoughts was a mix, as usual in such cases—most of it hardly thinking at all, and the rest a kind of white-hot wish to damage something, and a desire to hustle away from there before I got hurt. Then, too, it had reached the limit about Miss Hitty—I sure was n’t going to stand hearing her name mishandled by tavern loafers. Yet the principal cause for my staying was my anxiety to leave. That big, bel-lowing Irishman, dragging a half-dozen men to get at me, blood streaming down his face, and his expression far from agreeable, put a crimp in my soul, and don’t you forget it. But I understood that this was my first man’s-size proposition, and if I did n’t take my licking like a man I never could properly respect myself afterward. So whilst my legs were

Plain Mary Smith

pleading, "Come, Willie, let 's trot and see mother—it will be pleasanter," I raked my system for sand and stood pat.

I knew a trick or two about assaulting your fellow-man as well as Mick, when you come to that. Fighting is really as good an education for fighting as sparring is, and perhaps a little better. It ain't so much a question of how you make your props and parries, as how much damage you inflict upon the party of the second part.

"Let him come!" I says. "What you holding him for, 's if he was a ragin' lion or something? Let go of him!"

"You skip, you darn fool," says my first friend. "He 'll eat you raw."

"Well, it will be my funeral," I says. "If you will see he don't put me down and gouge my eye out, I 'll take him as he comes."

Gouging was a great trick with that gang,—I feared it more than death itself.

Just at that minute old Eli drove up. "What

The Fight

in tarnation 's this?" says he. When he found out, he tried to make me go home, but all this advice I did n't want had made me more determined. I got crying mad. "Gol-ding it all to thunder!" says I, hopping up and down. "You see me fair play and turn him loose, Eli. I want one more swat at him,—just let me hit him once more, and I 'll go home."

Eli was a tall, round-shouldered man, who looked like a cross between a prosperous minister and a busted lawyer. He had a consumptive cough, and an easy, smoothing way with his hands, always sort of apologizing. Several men had been led astray by these appearances, and picked a quarrel with Eli. Two weeks in bed was the average for making that mistake.

He looked at me with his head sideways, pulling his chin whisker. "Billy," says he, "I hev experienced them sentiments myself. It shall be as you say." He went to his wagon, and drew out a muzzle-loading pistol from under the seat. The pistol was loaded with buck-

Plain Mary Smith

shot, and four fingers of powder to push it, as every one around knew. He walked up to Mick and put the touch of a cold, gray, Yankee eye on him. "Young man," he says, "I ain't for your clawin', chawin', kickin' style of conductin' a row, so I tell you this: you fight that boy fair, or I 'll mix buckshot with your whisky.—Turn your bullock loose!"

The men let go of him, and he come.

Fortunately, I remember every detail of that scrap, clear as crystal. I led with my left, and Mick countered with his chin. A thunderstorm hit me in the left ear. Kerbang, ker-swot. Scurry-scurry, biff-biff-biff. Somebody hit somewhere. Somebody with a pain in the neck. No time to find out who it is. Zip, smash, rip; more pains; streaks of fire on the horizon; must have run aground. Roar-roar-bump,—ah, bully for you, Billy! Slam him, Mick! Hit him again, sonny! You got him! Now you got him! Aaaay-hooray!

Here we go, bumping over the ties. Right



“You fight that boy fair?”

The Fight

over the edge of the trestle,—bing! C'm' off'n him, you big black whelp, aggh! le' go! Twist his thumb! Kick the brute! Get up, boy! Roooor swishz.—Where in thunder did the big black thing come from? Never mind. No time to stop. Lovely Peter! How she rolls! Who 's sick?—Mick, probably. Lightning struck, that time. . . . Again . . . Mmmmmmearrrrr . . . dark . . . dark. Raining ice-water! He 's all right! Give him a little air! Somebody crying, “I did the best I could by him, Eli; g-gu-gug-gol-darn him!” More light. Daybreak, and here I am again, on the ground, wet to the hide, the bucket they emptied on me alongside, and Eli holding my head up. And what 's the thing opposite, with one eye swelled shut, and a mouth the size of a breakfast-roll?—Why, it 's Mick!

“Did he lick me, Eli?” says I.

Eli laughed kind of nervous. “Neither you, nor him, nor me, will ever know,” says he. “He 's willing to call it a draw.”

Plain Mary Smith

I staggered to my feet and wobbled to my partner in the dance, holding out my hand. "Much obliged to you, Mick," says I.

He leaned back and laughed, till I joined, as well as I could, for crying. He grabbed my hand and shook it. "Yer all right," says he. "Sorry I am I said a word to ye. An' yer th' h— of a red-headed bye to fight. I 've enough."

Whilst I was a simple lad, I was n't a fool. For me to hold that two-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound rough-and-tumble fighter even, was impossible. He was ashamed of the whole thing. As soon as his ugly temper had the edge knocked off it, he took that way of closing the deal. No bad man at all, old Mick.

"You say that to save my feelings," I said.

"What 's that?" says he, rough and hard. "Off with ye!" He would n't admit being decent for a farm. He swung away. Then I got another jar. A voice called me and I swung around.

V.

“ON MY BUREAU WAS A KNIFE—”

MY father stood behind me, such a picture it chills me to think of him. All of his face was chalk-white; his hands shook like palsy. I reckon I can slide over the next little while. You guess what a crazy-mad man, who 's fed his mind on darkness for years, would be likely to do. I never raised a hand in defense—took it. At the same time I made my mind up to end this business, quick and strong. I had enough.

Of course, from father's point of view, something could be said. Had I been drunk and fighting at the tavern, as my nice, gentlemanly little friend, Algy Anker, ran and told him, nobody 'd blamed him for getting orry-eyed.

Plain Mary Smith

But he might have asked me what I had to say—a woman-killer gets that show. He used me bad enough, so Eli interfered. “I don’t care if I never sell another thing to you,” says he; “but, neighbor, you sha’n’t hit that boy ag’in—no, now! There ’s no use to squirm—you sha’n’t do it, and that ’s all. You run along, Bill.”

When mother saw me, she cried out. I was a sight, for sure. Ought to have washed up a bit, and not give her such a shock, but my head was sizzing like a pin-wheel. Only one idea stuck.

“I ’m not hurt much, mother,” I says. “I want to speak to you.”

Mother was quick-witted and hardy-witted, too. She knew there was no boy foolishness in this, so she choked down her feelings, got a basin, clean water, and a towel, and said, “Tell me while I bathe your face.”

I told her. It was queer how quiet I felt. I don’t know but what it ’s always that way,

“On my Bureau was a Knife—”
though, when a man has made his mind up tight. We seemed almost of an age, mother and me, that little while.

She pleaded with me. “Don’t leave your home, Will. I have been wrong; I should have done more; I did n’t, thinking things would right themselves; but now I ’ll promise to stand between.”

“And what will your life be like?” I asked her. I grew old pretty fast, under pressure.

“Never mind that!” she cried. “My boy, to have you with me—”

“Sh!” I says. “How could I help minding it?”

She was still.

“And worse might come,” I went on. “I don’t like to say it, yet every time I could n’t promise to be . . . There ’d come a day too often . . . I ’m strong, and if I should—”
She put her hand on my lips.

“Go to your room, Will; and let me think alone for a while,” she said. She caught me

Plain Mary Smith

and held me close, with never a tear, but a look worse than an ocean of tears. I could n't have stood it, if I had n't known I was doing the right thing. To a dead certainty, there would be no peace with me in the house. Any doubts anybody might have had was removed when father come in. He went straight to mother's room. I heard him shouting; talking so fast his words were broken; stamping around; quoting Scripture one minute, crying threats and slaughter the next. It was pitiful. I hustled, getting things ready; I knew, a little more of listening, and I 'd have nothing but contempt for my father. Then mother's voice rung out, telling him to leave until he could talk like a man. Usually, she could force him, when she wished, hers being so much bigger a mind, but this time the littler soul was beyond itself with fury. "Don't take that tone with me!" he roared. "I won't stand it! And as for the lies that boy told you, I 'll have them out of his back!" Their door slammed open, and he fairly ran toward mine. I jumped and locked

“On my Bureau was a Knife—”

it. Mother was close after him. “You shall *not!*” she said. “Listen to reason! You ’ve done enough harm— Oh!” she cried, in pain. I thought he hit her.

What I feared boiled up in me. On my bureau was a knife; a big, heavy knife, that got into my hand somehow. It was me and the devil for that round. How long I stood with the knife raised, I don’t know. Then mother spoke calmly. “You hurt my arm, holding it so tight,” she said. “That certainly is n’t necessary.” He had grace enough to beg her pardon. Finally, she got him to leave. A good job. That day had been a trifle too much for me, already. I can’t see a bare knife since, without a shudder. Don’t like the glint of steel at all. Years after, a flash of sun on water would bring things back, and I ’d have a sickness in the stomach.

An hour after, mother came in. “Well, my boy, you are right,” she says, as if the very life were out of her.

“Yes,” I says, thinking of the knife; “and

Plain Mary Smith

I 'll just slide out quiet, and no trouble to anybody."

She roused herself. "You will leave in daylight, my son," she says, "with your mother to say good-by. You have done nothing wrong, and you sha'n't leave ashamed."

"But, mother, that will make it bad for you," I says.

"I married your father; I brought you into the world," she says. "I know my duty, and I shall do it, if it costs all our lives, let alone a little trouble. And, besides," she says, getting up, excited, "no matter what any one can say, you 've been a good—" She broke down, all at once. The rest of it she cried into my shoulder, whilst I told her about how I 'd be rich and great in no time, and father 'd come around all right after a while, and we 'd all be happy, till she felt better. And I believed it myself so strong, and put it out so clear, that I think I convinced her. Anyway, they got along all right after I left. That 's a comfort.



“I left home . . . mother and father both waving
me good-by in the road”

“On my Bureau was a Knife—”

So it was arranged. I should n't say anything, but keep out of father's way until she made him yield the point. She laid it out to the old gentleman clear and straight, Mattie tells me—(Mattie's mother was my mother's half-sister)—telling him I was n't drunk, as he could readily prove, and as for the fighting, if he intended to beat me every time I defended a woman, why, she 'd leave, too. That part of it stuck in mother's mind; she would not listen when I told her it was only one of the reasons for the row. And she summed the thing up by saying I was determined to leave; that it was best all around; and that he must act like a human being and a father for once. By this time, I reckon he did n't feel so terrible proud of himself. At least, it was pulled off easy. I left home, with some small money in my pocket, a trunk of clothes in Eli's care, and mother and father both waving me good-by in the road, for the Great World, per Boston, and a schooner trading South, that belonged to Eli's cousin.

Plain Mary Smith

And here 's a queer thing. The day I left, Mick went into the tavern and called for a glass of whisky. He poured out a snorter and balanced it on the flat of his thumb. "Ladies and gintlemen," says he, "ye here behold th' koind friend that led Mick Murphy—that 's licked the country—to bang a bit of a bye, after misnamin' a dacent woman." Smash! goes the glass on the floor. "Tra-la-loo to you!" says Mick, flinging the barkeep' a half-dollar. "Keep the change," he says. "It 's the last cent I have, and the last you 'll get from me."

And that 's just what happened, too. He 's located about twenty mile over yonder, with a good factory and somewheres between ninety and nine thousand Murphys claiming him as their start. And my best friend is old Mick. He cried when I first went to see him. I reformed him, but it cost me my home. I never knew, either, till he told me himself, a year ago.

VI

“I ’M MARY SMITH”

PLUNK, plunk, plunketty-plunk, down the pike, me and Eli, and Dandy Jim, Eli’s black horse.

I ’ll never tell you how I felt. It was the first I ’d ever been away from home. All the regrets I had was eased by knowing it would n’t be more than six months before I ’d come back with a gunny-sack full of hundred-dollar bills, buy Mr. Jasper’s place with the pillars in front, and a railroad, and pervade things in general with a tone of pink and birds singing.

One thing about being a boy is that you ’re sure of to-morrow, anyhow.

Well, we slid along behind a free-gaited horse, in an easy wagon, over good roads, in

Plain Mary Smith

early New England summer, when every breath of air had a pretty story to tell. If it had n't been for the tight vest I had on, I reckon my heart would have bust my ribs for joyfulness.

Boston scart the life out of me. I had no notion there was that many folks and horses and buildings in the world. We pulled for the schooner right away, but none too quick for me. I never liked a crowd. A man understands he don't amount to much, yet don't like to have the fact rubbed in.

Cap'n Jesse Conklin owned the boat. He had a mild blue eye, a splendid line of cuss words, a body as big as mine, and a pair of legs that just saved him from running aground. When I first saw him I thought he was standing in a hole. Howsomever, he got around mighty lively on his little stumps, and he could light his pipe when the *Matilda*, of Boston, was throwing handsprings. He always opened his eyes wide and said, "Ha!" like he was per-

“I ’m Mary Smith ”

fectly astonished when you spoke to him. Then, to square things, you was really perfectly astonished when he spoke to you.

Eli introduced me. “Ha!” says the captain. “So this is one of them ripperty-splintered and bejiggered young thingermegummeries that runs away from hum, heh?” I don’t wish to be understood as giving the captain’s exact words, although I ain’t one of your durn prudes, neither.

Eli explained.

“Ha!” says the captain. “Is that so? Howjer come by them legs, young feller? You ’ll be riggin’ a set of stays fur them when we hit the stream. I ’ve seen shorter and thicker things than them growin’ on trellises.”

“Never you mind about his legs, you old bladder-head,” says Eli, cousinly. “You ’re to take the boy as passenger.”

“I am!” says Captain Jesse, jumping back, mad as a bumblebee. “I am; that ’s *me!* I

Plain Mary Smith

don't own this boat nor nothin'! I 've got to be told what I 'm to do, I have!"

"Sure!" says Eli, undisturbed.

"Well, all right," says the captain, calm as anything. "What makes you so hasty, Eli? Does he pay his passage, or work it?"

"He gives you five dollars in hand, and works the rest of it," says Eli.

The cap'n gave a horrible grin, showing a set of teeth like a small horse.

"And won't he work it!" says he, rubbing his hands together. "Dry land 'll do for him, two weeks out."

"Yaaas," says Eli. "You 're a turble person, you are—you 'd ought to been a pirate, Jess."

Cap'n Jesse got mad again—he was more like a little boy than anybody of his weight I ever see. He come up to Eli and shook his finger under that hawk-bill of a nose.

"I don't want none of your slack, Eli!" he says. "You 've tried me often"—here he got

“I ’m Mary Smith ”

impressive, talking very slow—“don’t you try me once too much!”

Eli grabbed the hand, stuck the finger in his mouth, and bit it.

“Aaoow!” yells the captain, grabbing his finger. “You quit your foolin’!”

By this time I was lost entirely. What to make of the proceedings was beyond guessing. Boylike, I thought men always acted with some big idea in view, but the next minute Eli and Cap’n Jesse had grabbed holt of one another and was scuffling and giggling around the deck like a pair of kids. Captain Jess was stout about the shoulders; he had Eli waving in the breeze once, but at last Eli gave him a back trip and down they come. Then up they got; each cut off a hunk of chewing and began to talk as if they ’d acted perfectly reasonable. Seems that ’s the way they always come together.

The three of us took a look about the boat. She was an able, fine three-master, the pride of Jesse’s soul; ’most as big as a ship.

Plain Mary Smith.

Them were the days when most folk built deep and narrer, but Jesse had ideas of his own when he laid down the lines of the *Matilda*, of Boston. She looked bluff and heavy in the bows and her bilges turned hard, but she walked over the water, and don't you forget it. Moreover, she was the kindest boat in a seaway I ever boarded. Old *Matilda* girl would heel just so far; after that the worst draft that ever whistled would n't put her under an inch; she 'd part with her sticks first. Handy boat, a schooner, too; sensible and Yankeeified. Lord! what a claw-and-messing on board a square-rigger, compared to it! And taking two men to the schooner's one at that.

The *Matilda* was fitted for passengers. She had eight nice clean cabins, and fine quarters for the crew. In most such boats you can't more 'n stand up, if you stretch between hair and shoe-leather the way I do, but here there was head-room a-plenty. And Uncle Jesse ate the boys well, too. Good old craft and good

“I ’m Mary Smith”

old boy running her. Soon ’s you realized that all his spitting and swearing and roaring did n’t amount to no more than a hearty sneeze, you got along with Jesse great, if you was fit to get along with anybody.

We took aboard four passengers that night, one of ’em being a lady. The next morning at four we pulled out with the ebb-tide.

Before we got into the open water, I felt such a joy boiling inside me I had to sing, no matter what the feelings of the rest were. Oh! Oh! The blue, bright sky; and the blue, crinkly, good-smelling water; the quantities of fresh air around, and *Matilda* picking up her white skirts and skipping for Panama! Neither man nor money will ever give me a feeling like that again. But then,—ah, then! And there ’s ’most always a then,—when the *Matilda* tried to spear a gull with her bowsprit, and, shame-faced at the failure above, tried to harpoon some little fishy with the same weapon,—why,

Plain Mary Smith

I hope I 'll never have a feeling like that again, neither.

I hung over a bunk like a snarl of rope. Jesse come down and grinned at me. I could n't even get mad. "Tell mother I died thinking of her," was all I could say.

Now that was noble of me. Many a man has cashed his checks not feeling half so bad; but if any poor soul ever regretted a good deed, I did that one. That last message to my mother seemed to remain in the memory of our ship's company, long after I was willing to forget it.

For two solid days I did n't live inside of myself,—mind floated around in space. After that, I got up, ready for anything in the line of eating they had on board. Jesse brought me a smoked herring and a cup of coffee,—the first coffee I ever tasted, mother thinking it was n't good for boys. Within ten minutes after my meal, William De La Tour Saunders belonged to himself once more. Never had a squirm of seasickness since. For the first week I was n't

“I ’m Mary Smith”

quite up to the mark, but Jesse told me to take a cup of sea-water every morning before breakfast, which tuned me up in jig-time.

I saw our lady passenger when she come up for air. A girl of about twenty, supple and balanced as a tight-rope walker; you thought she was slim when you first looked at her, yet when you looked the second time you could n't prove it. What a beautiful thing is a set of muscles that know their business! Muscles that meet every roll of a boat, or whatever it is they should meet, without haste and without loss of time,—just there, when they should be there! Why, to see that girl walk twenty feet on the schooner's deck was a picture to remember for the rest of your days. Kid that I was, I noticed there was n't a line in her make-up that said, “Look at me.” Afterward I learned to shake my head at graceful ladies, but I feel kindly toward them still, out of memory of that first girl. My mother moved beautifully, likewise Mattie. They were quiet,

Plain Mary Smith

though ; restful women ; this one was all spring and ginger,—for Heaven’s sake, don’t think I mean prancy ! Nor that I have n’t met a prancy girl or two who was all right, when I say that,—fat and jolly, yellow-haired girls, to go with good meals and a romp,—but this My Lady was made of the stuff Uncle Shakspeare wrote. She was clean and sweet as pine-woods after rain, but full of fire, sense, and foolishness.

I remember thinking, “When this girl turns round she ain’t going to be handsome in the face. With that head of hair, that back, and that walk, Providence will feel square on the deal.” And when she did turn round I simply spread my hands, mouth, and eyes, and looked at her. I forgot being aboard ship, I forgot where I was going and why, I forgot who I was and everything else ; all I knew was that a kind of human I never believed lived was walking toward me.

I caught one glance of her eyes ; outside their

“I ’m Mary Smith”

beauty was fun, kindness, and a desire to be friends; from that minute one red-headed puppy-dog found something to live for.

My devotion had nothing to do with the ordinary love-affair. As for marrying her, no such idea entered my loft. I had no jealousies. All I wanted was for her to be near me, to be a friend of mine, and that she might be on hand to approve if I did something surprising. I wanted the privilege of her hearing me talk about myself; and, for the rest of it, I could sit and look at her beauty, the same as you or me could sit and listen to the greatest music. It meant more than just good looks; I would n't go too far if I said it was a kind of religion. And the devil take my soul if I forget the horse-sense and kindness that girl used in teaching a foot-loose boy what a different place this world is, from what he 'd been like to think it, without her. A young feller's first outpourings toward a woman has more effect on him than even his mother's years of

Plain Mary Smith

care. He kind of takes mother for granted. The other woman represents his own endeavors. I played in luck.

We were introduced, bang! When about ten feet away from me she took her hand from the rail to gather in one end of a shawl. At that minute the *Matilda* saw a whale, or something, and shied. We struck the mainmast together, me trying to hold her up. She said, "Why, how do you do?" I said I did very well, and was she hurt? She said, not in the least, thank you, except in her feelings, at being so clumsy. I said, if *she* was clumsy, why, then, why, then— Now I was a little bashful. Nobody could be a clodhopper who lived with my mother, and ordinarily I acted quite like a man when necessary, but this was a little sudden. I could n't reach the word I looked for. With one hand braced against the mainmast, her hair standing in a black cloud about her head, the color whipped to her cheeks, she gave me a flash from the corner of her eye: "I 'm afraid I lose my compliment," said she.



"The *Matilda* saw a whale, or something, and shied"

“I ’m Mary Smith”

Afterward I learned she had liked me from the first, too, and was afraid I might n’t turn out well. Lucky for me I did n’t try to show off!

“I would n’t think it a compliment to compare you to anything on earth!” says I, meaning every word of it.

She laughed out, hearty as a boy. “Royal!” she said, and held out her hand.

“And the hand is the hand of—?” she asked.

“Bill Saunders,” said I, thinking to take off my hat.

“I sound almost as honest as you,” said she.

“I ’m Mary Smith.”

It was almost a shock to think she was Mary Smith. Since then it would be a shock to think of her as Eulalie Rosalinde De Montmorency. She did n’t need it. Plain Mary Smith told of what was beneath her loveliness,—and, I ’m forced to admit, her side-stepping and buck-jumping, once in a while. Oh, she could cut loose for fair, if stirred, but you could always remember with perfect faith Mary Smith.

Plain Mary Smith

It was n't five minutes after we started talking that Arthur Saxton came along. The girl knew him, and said good morning in that civil, hold-off fashion a good woman uses to a man she thinks may come to liking her too well, or that she may come to like too well, when the facts are against any happy result. So there was three of us, that took our little share of what followed, gathered together early in the game.

I liked Saxton from the jump. He had more faults than any other man I ever seen. He was the queerest, contrariest cuss, and yet such a gentleman; he had such a way, and such talents, that when you were mad enough to kill him, you could n't help but feel glad you knew him to get mad at. Somehow, he steered clear of meanness. There was a sort of nobility in his capers, even when his best friends would have to admit they did n't seem to be of a size for a full-grown man. I don't know how to express myself. He often played a poor part;

“I ’m Mary Smith”

but darned if he did n't carry it off well, because it was him; I think that 's the nearest I can come to it; good or bad, large or small, he was always Saxton, never attempting to put on anything different. And vain! Well, Heaven preserve us! And, on the other hand, not vain, neither. 'T was like this. Among the things he did well enough to be high-class was playing the violin. He had a style and a go in it all his own, but he had n't spent the time to learn some of the stunts that go with the trade. All the same, his natural gifts got him a job to play in concerts. The boss of the affair was a German, the kind of a man who had a soul to realize that Saxton made music, but had a head to go crazy over his slam-dashery. Now, Saxton grew excited whilst playing, and cut loose on his own hook, letting the poor perspiring Dutchman and the rest of the orchestra keep up to his trail the best they could. At these opportunities the Dutchman went home in a cab, frothing at the mouth. You see, he understood it was great

Plain Mary Smith

stuff, as far as Saxton was concerned, so he cussed the cab-driver and the cab-horse, and the people on the street, being an honest sort of Dutchman, if limited; but, also, he had a pride in his gang, and he felt entitled to a show, here and there.

At last there come a big occasion. Saxton was half sick and loaded up on champagne and coffee to pull through the evening. I have his own word for it, the mixture done wonders. Right in the middle of a piece by a gentleman whose name I don't recall, as it 's spelt with all the tail-end of the alphabet, and sounds like rip-sawing a board, Saxton throws dull care away and wanders into regions of beautiful sounds hitherto unexplored. Now and then the tall and melancholy gent with the bull-fiddle would scratch out a note or two, and the drummer got in a lick here and there, while the flute man toodle-oodled around to head off Saxy; but, on the whole, that orchestra was worse lost than so many West Pointers trying to catch an

“I ’m Mary Smith”

Apache who ain’t longing for home. They sat and let old Saxton ramp by himself, laying low to hit her up strong on the last note. And they did,—but they misguessed the note. Saxton ground his teeth yet, recalling the finish. “It was my best,” said he. “I was inspired that night,—and then, for that assortment of garlic and sausage to smash me!”

Well, he heaved his fiddle at the poor leader, and called him a barrel of sauerkraut afloat on a sea of beer, right before the whole audience. It is perhaps unnecessary to state that he and the orchestra parted company. Now he was off for Panama,—quit fiddling forever. Done with it. Going to take up a *man’s* work, he said. He did n’t mention the variety, but rolled out the statement as if it was a joy. In the meantime, he was painting pictures and writing a novel. The pictures never got finished, and the novel has n’t come out, but those things did n’t make him any less entertaining; and, as usual, what did get done of them was

Plain Mary Smith

almighty well done, and done in a way only Arthur Saxton could do. I never see such a man to stamp himself on anything he put his hand to. And when he was working, if you said the least thing against the job, he wanted trouble with you; but the next day he 'd smoke his pipe and tear it apart worse than you possibly could. That was Saxy: first crack, spoiled kid; second thought, clear-headed man.

The three of us, Mary and him and me, walked the deck day after day, talking of everything, from what fine weather it was to religion. Once Saxton called our attention to the wind in the rigging. Afterward I knew it sounded like Injun chants and coyotes howling, but Saxton asked if we did n't notice how much it was like the songs the children sing in play. He said those songs must have been handed down from far-off days—when we whites were savages, hopping around hollering hye-ee yah, hye-ee yah, and calling on the ladies, dressed in a streak of red paint. I don't know

“I ’m Mary Smith”

about that, though. No child in this world can be as mournful enjoying himself as a cow-puncher with all night before him and seven hundred verses to get through; there ’s puncher songs would make a strong man curl up and die.

Now, says Saxton, what makes children and savages, who have a clear field to amuse themselves as they see fit, pick, with deliberate choice, such melancholy tunes? And he said it was because nature always hit on that; wind in rigging, wind in trees, waterfalls, the far-off hum of the city, all sad, sad.

I asked him, if it was natural, where did we get the idea it was sad? It struck me that if a thing was natural, it was natural, not sad, nor nothin’ else.

He said, because nature was sad. Mary said, no such a thing; nature was n’t sad—there were the flowers and green fields, also natural, and pleasant and cheerful to the eye; there was more blue sky than gray, and as for

Plain Mary Smith

the savage being sad, why, that might be, but it was n't sad to think that men were working out of savagery into civilization.

So then Saxton gave civilization one for its Ma, and talk brisked up. Civilization stood for Dutchmen that ran orchestras to Saxton, and he did n't spare her feelings none. I was glad Civvy, old girl, was no friend of mine. According to him, of all the mistakes so foolish that to think of bettering it was like building a hole with no rim around it, civilization stood first and foremost.

Mary got red in the face and her eyes shone. They had it up one side and down the other, forgetting me entirely. Finally Saxton told her she was n't talking honestly, that she hated civilization worse than he did, and it was plumb hypocrisy for her to set up in its defense; whereupon she replied that *she* had n't wasted her time and talents, anyhow; that she was n't throwing things up the first little obstacle that came in the way. Which did n't seem to be just

“I ’m Mary Smith ”

the answer one might expect to the charge, but finished Saxton plenty.

He drew himself up proud. “If every topic had to turn to personalities—” said he.

“I did n’t begin the personalities,” said Mary. “You called me a fraud.”

“I never did!” cries Saxton. “I said you were defending a cause you did n’t believe in!”

“And that is n’t a fraud? I admire your distinctions.”

Saxton chewed his mustache and swallowed. He made her a low bow and said, in a tone of voice to flatten her out: “I am glad Miss Smith finds something admirable in me!”

Mary’s lip curled hard and contemptuous. It *was* kiddish.

“There ’d be plenty in you to admire if you let it have liberty,” she said. “The trouble is that your follies seem worth it, to you.”

“Follies! You let me off lightly. Why not absurdities, idiocies?”

Plain Mary Smith

“Pick your name,” she said, throwing away her interest with a sweep of her hand.

“There is one folly you give me great cause to regret,” he answered her, his manhood coming back to him, “but yet I never do.”

“Oh!” she jeered at him. “You should renounce them all. If I understand your meaning, that is the least excusable—you have some reason for the others.”

Later I understood the cruelty of that speech. It was cruel to be kind, but it was mighty cruel and a doubtful kindness. It woke old Saxton up. He took a breath and shook. He put a hand on her shoulder, standing straight and tall—a handsome, slim critter, if ever there lived one.

“Listen!” he said, quiet, but all of him in it. “You shall care for me, just as I am—you understand? A fool, and a this, and a that—but you shall care.”

A look in her eyes—the kind of defy that grows of being scart—showed his talk was n’t all air.

“I ’m Mary Smith ”

But it went in a second, and she whirled on him. “Why don’t you advertise your intentions?” she demanded. “If I had an idea I should be so persecuted—”

“Don’t say persecuted, little girl,” he answered her softly. “Let ’s be friends the rest of the trip. I ’ll trouble you no more,—by sea,” he finished, smiling.

She gripped the rail and looked out over the waters. Again her eyes turned to him for a second. He was worth it. That dark, long face of his, set off with his red neckerchief, made something for any woman to look at. And we ’re not always so darned fond of reasonable people as we make out.

“If only—” she began, then bit back whatever it was. “Well, as you say,” she wound up, “let us be friends. Is n’t it foolish for us to quarrel so, Will?” she asked, turning to me. “I think you must feel we ’re both ridiculous.”

“I don’t care whether you are or not,” I said. “I like you both.”

Saxton looked pleased ’way back in his dark

Plain Mary Smith

eyes. "That 's the boy for my money!" he said. And then we three began to laugh.

"It 's all too beautiful to quarrel in," he said, waving an arm around. "To feel sorrowful on such a day, savage or civilized, really is ridiculous."

She could n't help giving him one last jab,— I make a guess he turned happy too soon to please her. If she did n't like him, she liked somebody who so much resembled him that she wanted to have him around to remind her.

"Mr. Saxton's sorrows are soon healed," she said. "That 's a valuable disposition."

"I take *that* as friendly, because I must," said he, smiling in a way, as with the other things he did, that was beautiful in a fashion of its own. She tried to buck against it, to keep sneering; but something so young and joyful was in his face, she could n't help smiling back at him. So we walked the deck and talked about everything in the best of humors.

VII

“SAVE ME, ARTHUR!”

THE first part of the *Matilda's* trip slid by, day after day, like a happy dream.

We had weather that could n't be bettered; days of sunlight and pretty sailing breezes; nights picked out of heaven. The moon was in her glory. I like high land better than I do the ocean, but few sights can beat a full moon swelling over the glitter of water. There 's also a snugness, a cozy, contented feeling, aboard a small boat, that you can't get elsewhere, except in a prairie camp. I suppose it 's the contrast between so much space of sky and land or water, where people are not, and the little spot where they are, that makes your partners rise in value.

Plain Mary Smith

Of course, the fact that it was my first cut-away puts a gilt edge on all that time, yet one other thing, a new thing, that made all my life different for me, must get its credit. That was music,—good music. Back home they were n't much in the musical line. I think I can remember when mother used to play the piano some, but her life soon jarred all that out of her. Bar here and there a man with a mouth-organ or a concertina, and a fiddler to do dance-tunes, the only thing that stood for music to me was the singing in father's church. I have since thought that anybody who could stand that once a week was certainly a good Christian. I remember one Sunday the preacher told us about heaven, and how it was a steady line of harps and hymn-tunes. I put in the rest of that Sunday bewildered. I did n't want to go to hell, and after that description of heaven I was n't anxious to go there, neither. Looked like the hereafter was dark and uncertain.

But when I first heard Saxton, with his fid-

“Save me, Arthur!”

dle; Barbado Joe, the nigger cook, with the guitar; and Mary singing, my soul just laid on its back and purred. I was standing at the rail, thinking, kind of misty kid-fashion, one moonlit night, when there came a ripple of little notes from the guitar, with three wind-up chords like spring water in the desert. Then old Sax's fiddle 'way, 'way up; so light, so delicate, so sweet and pretty that shivers ran down my back. I stiffened like a pointer-pup first smelling game. “Here 's something,” I thought, “something that 's me, all right, but I don't understand yet.” And then, Mary's voice rose gorgeous out of the bigness of sky and moonlight and water; it filled the whole empty world, without an effort. Me and the moon and the waves stopped dead and listened. Even the *Matilda* trod the water gently.

I turned and looked at Mary. There 's no way for me to tell you what a picture she made. If I say she was beautiful, you 'll think of some woman you know, and that 's wrong, for there

Plain Mary Smith

never was another like Mary. She was always beautiful, but never else had quite the touch as when lost in her singing. Man, she was Paradise itself, and when she opened her lips and sang, you entered the gates thereof.

Of course, everybody 's heard good singing, the same as everybody 's seen handsome faces, but once in a while you strike a face or a voice that 's beyond all guessing. You 'd never believed it, if you had n't seen or heard it.

She sang as easily as you think,—opened her lips and it rolled out. And, in spite of power that could ring the air for miles and never seem loud, a deep something trembled underneath that was the very soul of pity and womankindness, and another little something floated high and joyful above it like the laugh of a child. Yes, sir. That voice was food, drink, and clean blankets. When she stopped, I thought I never wanted to hear a sound again. But I did n't know the limit of old Sax. With her voice quivering in his heart, he grabbed up



“He grabbed up his wooden box and made a miracle”

“Save me, Arthur!”

his wooden box and made a miracle. Sure, it was different; but just as sure he tore a hole in you. His eyes were on Mary, backing the story the violin was telling. She was giving way, too. Her eyes would meet his, as if she could n't help herself. He 'd promised not to speak, but that did n't stop the old fiddle from making out the prettiest kind of case.

She sat with her chin in her hand, breathing deep. The violin would give a tug at her, and, as I say, her eyes would turn to Sax, and then she 'd force them away again, over the water, slowly down to the deck once more. She was frightened. I don't blame her, for Sax was out of himself. He towered there in the moonlight making those inhumanly beautiful sounds, his face burning white and his eyes burning black, fire clean through, fire in every soople muscle, fire pulsing out of every heave of his shoulders, one handsome and scary figure. There was something so out-and-out wild in

Plain Mary Smith

him, I swear he looked as if he could call up devils from the sea.

Well, when a man does get beyond the ordinary he scares the rest of the tribe. If two fellows start to fight, the bystanders will try to separate them. It 's kind of instinct—I 've done it many a time myself, when it would have been better to let the boys whack 'emselves good-natured instead of keeping the grudge sour on their stomachs. Anyway, I can't blame Mary for feeling leery of Sax when I confess that he put creeps in my spine. He seemed to grow till he filled the bow of the boat; the fiddle sung in my ears till I could n't think straight; heavy medicine in it, you bet. Mary got whiter and whiter. I saw her constantly wetting her lips, and her hand went to her heart. The whole night was changed. The air was full of war and uneasiness. I wish to Heaven I knew how it might have ended, if nothing interrupted, because Saxton was doing magic. It was the queerest feeling I ever had.

“Save me, Arthur!”

What Mary's feelings were I'd give something to know, but just when things were the tightest old Jesse come up and pulled my sleeve.

“Get the girl below quiet,” he says. “Hell will be loose in a minute.”

I stared at him. Coming on top of my queer sensations, it gummed my works. Jesse pointed to the sou'east.

A cloud was flying north, the center of it black, but wisps and streamers flew out white in the moonlight like steam from an explosion. To the north of it lay another storm, huge and heavy, black as death, except where lightning sprayed through it.

“Wind, Jesse?” I says.

“The last time I see a thing like that, boy,” he says, “I made land three days later, aboard a hencoop—the only one of a hull ship's company. Get that girl below.”

I thought quick, as he walked away. The fiddle had stopped. A wicked silence lay on everything. Old man Fear put his cold feet on

Plain Mary Smith

me. I looked again at the mass to s'utherd. It boiled and turned and twisted. Big gusts of black and white shot crazily out to nowhere—she was climbing! Then I looked at the group. Mary sat white and still. Sax stood behind her, his fiddle by his side, holding the bow like a sword. He was white and still, too, and looking up to where the moon was going out. Their backs were turned to the devilry that threatened us.

I stepped forward,—easy as possible, and spoke to her.

“You 're not looking well, Mary,” I said. “Had n't you better go down?”

That was before my poker days. Playing a four-flush gives a man control of his face and voice. She heard what I wanted to hide at once, being naturally sharp as a needle and tuned high that night.

“What 's the matter?” says she.

“Matter?” says I, laughing gaily. “Why, I don't want to see you sick—come along like a good girl.”

“Save me, Arthur!”

“Tell me why I should, and I will,” she says. Well, what was the use? Had n’t she the right to know? When old Jesse said trouble was turning the corner, you could expect the knock on the door. He had the reputation of being the most fearless as well as the most careful skipper in the coast trade. He never took a chance, if there was nothing in it, and he ’d take ’em all, if there was.

Sax bent to us. “What ’s up?” says he. I did n’t say a word—pointed behind him. He looked for a full five seconds.

“Tornado, by God!” he says in a sort of savage whisper.

He took the violin and bow in those thin strong hands of his and crumpled ’em up, and threw the pieces overboard. I ’ll swear he felt what I did—that he *had* called up a devil from the sea.

Then he put a hand on Mary’s shoulder. “Go below, sweetheart,” he said.

“But you ’ll call me—you ’ll let me—” she says, an agony in her eyes.

Plain Mary Smith

“You ought to know that I will be with you, if there ’s no need of me here,” he said. We stood stock-still for a minute. It had come with such a stunning bang.

“There is great danger, Mary,” said Saxton. “But you ’ll be brave, my dear?”

“I will, Arthur,” she answered. Then her eyes filled with panic and she caught him around the neck. “Save me, Arthur! Save me!” she cried. “Oh, I don’t want to die!”

Never in his life had Arthur Saxton stood up more of a man and gentleman. He put his hand on her head and looked courage into her. “Nor do I want to die while there ’s a chance of you,” he said. “Now you ’ll believe and trust me, and go with Will?”

I think he kissed her—I don’t remember. That hell aloft was sudsing fast to us, and I was dancing inside to do something beside wait for a drowning. Anyhow, old Jesse’s voice ripped out ferocious; there was a rattle of blocks, and I put Mary below at the bottom of

“Save me, Arthur!”

the step, picked up a lantern for her, told her we 'd watch out more for her than we would for ourselves, and seeing how utterly God-forsaken the poor girl looked, I kissed her, too.

“Don't leave me, Will! Oh, don't!” she cried; “I can't stand it!”

“I must,” I pleaded. “Mary, think! I may be some use.”

She gripped herself. “That is so. Go, Will.”

It hurt to go. The lantern made a dim light in which her face half showed. The shadows shifted black, here and there. From above came a grinding, shattering sort of roar, like a train crossing a bridge. It was horrible to leave a woman alone to face it. But then came a scurry and trampling of feet on deck; yells and orders. That was my place.

“Good-by! God save you!” I said, caught her hand for a good-by, and jumped up the stair.

Plain Mary Smith

I was just in time. They slammed the hatch down almost on my heels.

“Mary’s there!” I screamed in Jesse’s ear.

“It ’s her only chance!” he roared back.

On deck that machinery roar drowned everything. It rattled the bones in your body. The deck sung to it. You felt the humming on your feet. It dumbered and tortured you at the same time, like a fever-dream. You could n’t think for it, and your temper was spoiled entirely.

Lightning! My God! It was zippitty-flash-flash-flash, so fast and fearful that the whole world jumped out into broad day and back a hundred times a minute. Heaven send I ’ll never see another such sight as the sea those flashes showed. Under the spout it was as if somebody had run a club into a snake-hole. You got it, to the least crinkle, in the lightning blasts. There were walls of water like Niagara Falls, jumbled up, falling, smashing together. If it hit us square we ’d vanish.

Saxton stood near me. He passed me a rope

“Save me, Arthur!”

and signed for me to make myself fast. I could n't do it. I must be free. I thought of Mary, below, and shook. What must she feel? We could n't get down to her now, and that made me sick. Saxton fastened the rope around me. He put his mouth to my ear and shouted, “You never could hold without it!”

I let him do what he liked. All desire to do anything myself, one way or the other, was rattled out of me.

“How is she?” he shrieked again. I could just hear him at a one-inch range.

“All right,” I said.

“Make a little prayer to Himmel,” he says, “for here it comes!”

Here it come. Something that looked like the Atlantic up-ended loomed over the bows. The wind struck me flat on my back, in one grand crash of snapping wood, roaring water, thunder, and the fall of the pillars of the world. The ocean swept over me, yet I rose high in the air. I felt that the *Matilda* was turning a

Plain Mary Smith

back somersault. The rope nearly cut me in half. Just when my lungs were pumping so I could n't hold my breath a heart-beat longer, the wind suddenly cut over my face. Man! It hit like a fire-engine stream! I turned and swallowed some of it before we went down into the deep again. After that, it was plain disorderly conduct. Part of the time I was playing at home, a little boy again, and part of the time I was having a hard time trying to sleep in strange lands. But the next thing I can swear to is that the moon was shining, and the *Matilda* jumping like a horse. In spite of the aches and pains all over me, I just lay still for a minute and let it soak in that I was still on board this pretty good old world. Next, I thought of Mary and the rest of them and scrambled to my feet. I was dizzy—a three-inch cut across the top of my head gave reason enough for that, let alone the rest of the racket—and one eye was swelled shut. Otherwise, barring a sprained arm, a raw circle around

“Save me, Arthur!”

me where the rope cut, a black-and-blue spot the size of a ham on my right leg, and all the skin off my knuckles, I was the same person.

Saxton got himself up. We stared at each other.

“Hello!” says he.

“Hello!” says I.

“Well, what the devil are you doing alive?” he says. He meant it, too. It seemed to astonish him greatly. This made me mad.

“Well, I guess I have a right to,” I says. At this we both laughed very hard. So hard I could n’t stop, till he grabbed me by the arm.

“Mary!” he says.

We both tried to cast our moorings. The knots were jammed beyond fingers and teeth. He took out a knife and we cut loose. On the way to the hatch we come across Jesse sitting up straight, staring out to sea. He put his hand to his head and put it down again, looking at his fingers. What he found so interest-

Plain Mary Smith

ing in the fingers I don't know, but he could n't take his eyes off of them.

“Hurt, Jesse?” we asked him.

He turned a face like a child's to us. “My,” he says, “was n't it wet!”

“Come on!” says Sax; “he 's all right!”

We pulled the scuttle off by main strength.

“Mary!” we called. “Mary!”

“Yes!” she answered. The relief was so sweet my knees weakened. She came to the stair and looked up. Durned if the old lantern was n't burning. That knocked me. I remembered lighting that lantern several hundred years ago, and here it was, still burning!

“Are you hurt?” said Saxton.

“Not—no, not much,” she answered. “But nearly dead from fright—is it over?”

“All over, thank God!” says Sax. “We only caught the edge of it, or— The moon is shining now. There 's a heavy sea still, but that 's harmless if the boat is n't strained—do you want us to stay with you?”

“Save me, Arthur!”

She looked up and laughed—a great deal nearer being sensible than either Sax or me.

“If I could stand the other, I can stand this alone—where ’s your promise, Arthur? You never came near me.”

He took this very seriously. “Why, Mary,” he began, “do you think I would have left you if I could have helped it? They closed the hatch—”

“Come along,” I said. “She ’s joking.”

He turned and looked at me. “*Is she?*” he asked, as earnest as if his life hung on it. Not the least strange memory of that night is when Arthur Saxton turned and said, “*Is she?*”

“Sure!” I replied. “Come—some of the boys may be badly hurt.”

We pulled through that uproar surprisingly good. Of course, every man-jack of us had lumps and welts and cuts, and there were some bones broken. Saxton was slapped down with such force that the flat of his hand was one big blister where it hit the deck, and the whole line

Plain Mary Smith

of his forearm was a bruise—but that saved his face. One passenger drew a bad ankle, jammed in the wreckage. The worst hurt was Jimmy Hixley, a sailor; a block hit him in the ribs—probably when the mainmast went—and caved him for six inches.

The actual twister had only hit one third of us, from where the mainmast stood, aft. That stick was pulled out by the roots—clean. Standing rigging and all. Good new stuff at that. Some of the stays came out at the eyes and some of 'em snapped. One sailor picked a nasty hurt out of it. The stays were steel cable, and when one parted it curled back quick, the sharp ends of the broken wires clawing his leg.

Nobody knows the force of the wind in that part of the boat. Had there been a man there, no rope could hold him from being blown overboard; but, luckily, we were all forward.

The rails were cut clean as an ax stroke. Nothing was left but the wheel, and the deck

“Save me, Arthur!”

was lifted in places as if there 'd been an explosion below.

However, we were n't in the humor to kick over trifles. We shook hands all around and took a man's-sized swig of whisky apiece, then started to put things shipshape.

Jesse had an extra spar and a bit of sail that we rigged as a jigger, and though the *Matilda* did n't foot it as pretty as before, we had a fair wind nearly all the rest of the trip, making Panama in two weeks, without another accident.

VIII

ARCHIE OUT OF ASPINWALL

THE thing I recall clearest, when we dropped anchor at Aspinwall, was a small boat putting off to us, and a curly yellow head suddenly popping up over the rail, followed by the rest of a six-foot whole man. That was Jimmy Holton, my future boss.

Him and Jesse swore how glad they was to see each other, and pump-handled and pounded each other on the back, whilst I sized the new-comer up. He was my first specimen of real West-Missouri-country man; I liked the breed from that minute. He was a cuss, that Jimmy. When he looked at you with the twinkle in them blue eyes of his, you could n't help but laugh. And if there was n't a twinkle in those eyes,

Archie out of Aspinwall

and you laughed, you made a mistake. Thunder! but he was a sight to take your eye—the reckless, handsome, long-legged scamp! With his yellow silk handkerchief around his neck, and his curls of yellow hair—pretty as a woman’s—and his sombrero canted back—he looked as if he was made of mountain-top fresh air.

“Well, Jesse!” says he; “well, Jess, you durned old porpoise! You look as hearty as usual, and still wearing your legs cut short, I see; but what the devil have you been doing to your boat?”

So then Jesse told him about the tornado.

Jimmy’s eyes were taking the whole place in, although he listened with care.

“Well, what brings you aboard, Jim?” says Jesse.

“I ’m looking for a man,” says Jimmy. “I want a white man; a good, kind, orderly sort of white man that ’ll do what he ’s told without a word, and ’ll bust my head for me if I dast

Plain Mary Smith

curse him the way I do the pups working for me now.”

“H’m!” says Jesse, sliding me a kind of underneath-the-table glance. “What ’s the line of work?”

“Why, the main job is to be around and look and act white. I got too durned much to see to—there ’s the ranch and the mine and the store—that drunken ex-college professor I hired did me to the tune of fifteen hundred cold yellow disks and skipped. You see, I want somebody to tell, ‘Here, you look after this,’ and he won’t tell me that ain’t in the lesson. Ain’t you got a young feller that ’ll grow to my ways? I ’ll pay him according to his size.”

“H’m!” says Jesse again, jerking a thumb toward me. “There ’s a boy you might do business with.”

Jim’s head come around with the quickness that marked him. Looking into that blue eye of his was like looking into a mirror—you guessed



“ Still wearing your legs cut short, I see ’ ”

Archie out of Aspinwall

all there was to you appeared in it. He had me estimated in three fifths of a second.

“Howdy, boy!” says he, coming toward me with his hand out. “My name ’s Jim Holton. You heard the talk—what do you think?”

I looked at him for a minute, embarrassed. “I don’t seem to be able to think,” says I. “Lay it out again, will you? I reckon the answer is yes.”

“It sure is,” says he. “It ’s got to be. What ’s your name?” He showed he liked me—he was n’t afraid to show anybody that he liked ’em—or did n’t.

“Bill,” says I—“Bill Saunders.”

“Now Heaven is kind!” says he. “I had n’t raised my hopes above a Sam or a Tommy, but to think of a strapping, blue-eyed, brick-topped, bully-boy Bill! Bill!” he says, “can you guess Old Man Noah’s feelings when the little bird flew up to him with the tree in his teeth? Well, he ’ll seem sad alongside of me when I catch sight of that sunrise head of yours above

Plain Mary Smith

my gang of mud-colored greasers and Chinamen. You owe it to charity to give me that pleasure. By the way, William, if you should see a greaser flatten his ears back and lay a hand on his knife, what would you do—read him a chapter of the Bible, or kick him in the belt?”

I thought this over. “I don’t know,” says I. “I never saw anybody do that.”

“Bill,” says he, “I ’m getting more and more contented with you. I thought at first you might be quarrelsome. You don’t fight, do you?”

“Well,” I says, flustered, “not to any great extent—not unless I get mad, or the other feller does something, or I feel I ought to, or—”

“’Nough said,” says he. “There ’s reasons enough to keep the peace of Europe. I have observed, Bill, in this and many other countries, that dove-winged peace builds her little nest when I hit first and hardest. I tell you, on the square, I ’ll use you right as long as you seem

Archie out of Aspinwall

to appreciate it. That 's my line of action, and I can prove it by Jesse—I can prove anything by Jesse. No; but, honest, boy, if you come with me, there 's little chance for us to bunk as long as you do your share. And," he says, sizing me up, "if an accident should happen, when you 've got more meat on that frame of yours, be durned if I don't believe it would be worth the trouble."

"Explain to him," says Jesse; "the boy 's just away from his ma—he don't know nothing about working out."

Jim turned to me, perfectly serious—he was like Sax—joke as long as it was joking-time, then drop it and talk as straight as a rifle-barrel.

"I want a right-hand man of my own country," he says. "You 'll have to watch gangs of men to see they work up; keep an eye on what goes out from the stores; beat the head off the first beggar you see abusing a horse; and do what I tell you, generally. For that, I 'll put

Plain Mary Smith

one hundred United States dollars in your jeans each and every month we 're together, unless you prove to be worth more—or nothing. I won't pay less, for the man in the job that ain't worth a hundred ain't worth a cent—how 's it hit you?"

A hundred dollars a month! It hit me so hard my teeth rattled.

"Well," I stammers, "a hundred dollars is an awful lot of money—you ain't going to find the worth of it in my hide—I don't know about bossing men and things like that—why, I don't know *anything*—"

He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled at me. He had a smile as sweet as a woman's. He was as nice as a woman, on his good side—and you 'd better keep that side toward you. Him and Sax was of a breed there, too. I understood him better from knowing Sax.

"Billy boy," he says, "that 's my funeral. I 've dealt with men some years. I don't ask you for experience: I ask you for intentions. I

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get sick, living with a lot of men that don't care any more about me than I do about them—that *ain't* living. You can clear your mind. I like your looks. If I 've made a mistake, why, it 's a mistake, and we 'll part still good friends. If I have n't made a mistake, it won't take you long to learn what I want you to know, and I 'll get the worth of my time training a good pup—is it a go, son?"

I was so delighted I took right hold of his hand. "I begin to hope you and me will never come to words," said he as he straightened his fingers out.

I blundered out an apology. He reached up and rubbed my hair around. "There was heart in that grip, son," he said. "You need n't excuse that."

Just then Mary came on deck and he saw her. He whistled under his breath. "That the kind of cargo you carry now, Jess?" he asked. "I 'll take all you got off your hands at your own price."

Plain Mary Smith

“Like to know her?” says Jesse. “She ’s going to teach in one of them mission schools at Panama. You ’ll see her again, likely.”

“I suppose she ought to be consulted,” says Jim; “but I ’ll waive ceremony with you, Jesse.”

So they went aft to where Mary stood, a little look of expectancy on her face. She ’d been about to join Sax, but seeing the two come, did n’t like to move, as it was evident they had something to say to her.

Jesse and Jim made a curious team. Jesse flew along on his little trotters, whilst Jim swung in a long, easy cat-stride, three foot and a half to the pace. Jesse always looked kind of tied together loose. Jim was trim as a race-horse—yet not finicky. His spurs rattled on the deck. Take him from boots to scalp-lock, he was a pretty picture of a man.

“Miss Smith,” says Jesse, with a bob, “this feller ’s Jim Holton.”

“And very glad that he is, for once in his

Archie out of Aspinwall

life," says Jim, sweeping the deck with his hat, and looking compliments.

Mary smiled just enough to make the dimples count. They were best of the dimple family—not fat dimples, but little spots you 'd like to own.

She was n't the girl to take gaiety from a stranger; but, somehow, Jim showed for what he was—a clean heart, if frolicsome.

Mary was a match for him, all right. She made him as deep a bow, gave him a look, and in a mock-earnest way, with her hand on her heart, said:

“Am I to suppose myself the cause of so much joy?”

“You 're not to suppose—you 're to know,” says Jim.

“Well,” says Mary, with another flying look at him, “it does n't seem possible; but the evidence of such very truthful and very blue, blue eyes”—she stopped and looked at the eyes—“is, of course, beyond questioning.”

Plain Mary Smith

That knocked Jimmy. Underneath his dash, he was a modest fellow, and to have his personal appearance remarked openly rattled him. Mary 'd got the war on his territory in two seconds. He looked at her, dumb; until, seeing her holding back her laughter by means of a row of the whitest of teeth set into the most interesting of under lips, he laughed right out and offered his hand.

“I 'll simply state in plain English,” he says, not wanting to quit whipped, “that you are the best use those eyes have ever been put to.”

“That 's entirely satisfactory,” says Mary. “I 'd have a bad disposition not to be contented with that—and, Mr. Holton, here 's a friend of mine—Mr. Saxton.”

Saxton was the only one who had n't drawn entertainment out of the previous performance. He and Holton shook hands without smiles. It was more like the hand-shake before “time” is called. But they looked each other square in

Archie out of Aspinwall

the eye—honest enemies, at least—not like the durned brute—well, he comes later.

There they stood; fine, graceful, upstanding hu-huskies, both; each as handsome as the other, in his own way; each as able as the other, in his own way; one black and poetic-looking; the other fair and romantic-looking. You pays your money and you takes your choice. Sax knew more of books; Jim knew more of men. Sax knew the wild lands of music and such; Jim had slept with an Injun or two watching out to be sure he was n't late for the office the next morning. Either one was plenty durn good enough to make a girl fix her hair straight.

And there stood Mary, the cause of the look each man put upon the other. She 'd brought down Jim in one stroke—he was a sudden sort of jigger. Well, there she stood; and if there 's anything in having a subject worth fighting for, those two fellers ought to have been the happiest of men.

I 'm glad I can add this: Mary did n't *want*

Plain Mary Smith

any man to fight about her—not much! She was the real, true woman; the kind that brings hope in her hand. Of course she had some vanity, and if two fellows got a little cross when she was around, that would n't break her heart; but to arouse any deep feeling of anger between two men—why, I honestly believe she 'd rather they 'd strike her than each other. Oh, no! She stood for nothing of that kind. She stood heart and soul for light and fun and kindness. If she made mistakes, it was from a natural underrating of how the other party felt, or, like her worst mistake, through some twisted idea of duty. There 's a saying that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and that 's particularly true of women. When a good woman gets hold of half a fact, she can raise the very devil with it.

That two felt disposed to glare put restraint on conversation, and after some talk, in which Jim fished for an invitation to call on Mary in Panama, and got what you might call a limited

Archie out of Aspinwall

order—"I shall be very glad to see you, sometime, Mr. Holton"—he turned and treated me to a view of Western methods.

"Pack your turkey and come with me, Bill," he says.

"What—*now?*" says I.

"Well, I 'll wait, if you want me to," he says. "But what 's your reason?"

"Not any," says I, and skipped for my truck. Is n't it surprising how people, even boys, that ain't much troubled about fixed rules, will keep on going the same old way; not because there 's sense, comfort, nor profit in it, but simply because it is the same old way? I 've known folks to live in places and keep at jobs, hating both, could quit easily, yet staying on and on, simply because they were there yesterday. I 've got so that if people start talking over an act, I feel like saying, "For Heaven's sake! Let 's try it and then we 'll *know*," while at the same time it happens that their talk is so good, I feel bashful about cutting in. Give me the Western idea.

Plain Mary Smith

People that get an action on, instead of an oration. That is, if they 're the right kind of people. Yet I dearly love to talk. It 's a strange world!

Jimmy was the Western idea on two legs. The moment he thought of a thing, he grew busy. And when work was over, I 'd talk him against any man I ever met. Perhaps the chief difference between the Western man's way and the Eastern man's way is that the Westerner says it 's fun and believes it, whilst the Easterner says it 's a great and holy undertaking he 's employed in, and wastes lots of time trying to believe it. We all do the things we like to do, and we might as well admit it, cheerful.

I had n't much more than time to say good-by all around, and find out where Sax and Mary were going to stay, before I was off on the new deal.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” Jim asks me, when we hit shore.

“Never,” says I.

Archie out of Aspinwall

“Well,” says he, rubbing his head, “we *can* go across on the railroad, but I ’d like to stop here and there. It would n’t be so bad if the good critters had n’t been all hired out or bought this last rush. As it is, you stand to get on to something that don’t want you. My Pedro ’d eat you alive if you laid a hand on him, or I ’d trade with you—you got to learn sometime, Bill, but you ’ll get a tough first lesson here—suppose we take the train, eh?”

Now, I had n’t come to the Isthmus of Panama to exhibit all the things I was afraid of. I did n’t like the thought of playing puss-in-the-corner with a horse I ’d never met before, a little bit, and I liked the idea of backing out still less.

“Trot your animal out,” I says. “I guess, if I get a hold on him, we won’t separate for a while.”

Jim rubbed his head again.

“I don’t want to lose you right in the start,”

Plain Mary Smith

he says. "These mustangs are the most reliable hunks of wickedness on earth—"

"All I need to try and ride is a horse," I says. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "I won't quarrel with that spirit," he says. He spoke to a native in Spanish. The feller looked at me and spread both hands. I scarcely knew there was such a thing as a Spanish language, but I knew that those hands said, "This is the impossible you have shoved down my chimney."

Jim translated. "He says he can't think of but one brute, and he can't imagine you and that one making any kind of combination."

"If you 're keeping me here to see my sand run out, you 'll make it, all right," I says—"otherwise, get that horse."

Jim spoke to the native and the native looked at me again, shaking his head sorrowful. At last he discarded all responsibility and ambled off.

Here come my gallant steed. His neck had a

Archie out of Aspinwall

haughty in-curve; he was bow-legged forrud, and knock-kneed aft. His hips stuck out so far the hair couldn't get the nourishment it needed, and fell out. He had a nose like Julius Cæsar, an under lip that hung down three inches, and the eye of a dying codfish. I lost all fear of him at once. Ignorance is the papa of courage. According to instructions, I put my left foot in the stirrup and made ready to board. At that instant my trusty steed whipped his head around like a rattlesnake, gathered a strip of flesh about six inches long, shut his eyes, and made his teeth to approach each other. I've been hurt several times in my life, but for straight agony give me a horse-bite.

With a yell that brought out every revolutionist in Aspinwall,—which means the town was there,—I grabbed that cussed brute by the windpipe and stopped his draft. Jim and the native made some motions.

“Keep out of this!” I hollered. “This is my fight!”

Plain Mary Smith

So then me and my faithful horse began to see who could stand it the longest. There was nothing soul-stirring and uplifting about the contest. He pinched my leg, and I pinched his throat. He kicked me, and I kicked him. We wrestled all over the place, playing plain stick-to-him-Pete. The worst of having a hand-to-hand with an animal is that he don't tire. You get weaker and weaker; they get stronger and stronger. Besides, the pain in my leg almost seemed to stop my heart. Murder! how it hurt!

At the same time, a horse does n't do as well without an occasional breath of fresh air, and I had this feller's supply cut off short. Pretty soon he got frantic, and the way he tore and r'ared around there was a treat. It did n't occur to either one of us to let go. Finally, when I 'd ceased to think entirely, there came a staggering sort of fall; hands took hold of me and dragged me away.

Jim lifted my head and gave me a drink of water. He swore at himself ferocious, and by

Archie out of Aspinwall

all that was great and powerful, he was going to shoot that horse.

By this time I was interested in the art of riding. I told him he was n't going to kill my horse; that I intended to ride that same mustang out of the town of Aspinwall if it took some time and all of my left leg.

“What 's the good of being a fool?” says he. “Now, Bill, you be sensible.”

“Where 's the horse?” says I.

He had to laugh. “United you fell,” says he. “I honest think he had n't a cent the best of it.”

I got on my feet and made for Mr. Mustang. As the critter stood there, with his sad lower lip hanging slack, thinking what a wicked world it was, I recalled who he looked like. He was the dead ringer for Archibald Blavelt, back home. Archie was such a mean old cuss that the neighborhood was proud of him—he carried it 'way beyond the point where it was a disgrace. I should have known better than to tackle anything that resembled Archie, but I

Plain Mary Smith

did n't. Instead, I walked up, club in hand, waiting for the mustang to make a crooked move. He paid no attention, let me put my foot in the stirrup, swing aboard and settle down. Not till then did he toss his head gaily in the air and holler for joy. You see, he 'd made out that we were likely to break even, both on the ground, so he tried getting under me. I refuse to say what happened next. I thought I was aboard the *Matilda* with the tornado on. I saw, in jerks, pale-faced men scrambling right up the sides of houses; women shrieking and dusting away from there, and between thirty and forty thousand dogs, barking and snapping and tumbling out of the way.

I laid two strong hands on Archie's (I called him Archie) mane and wrapped my legs around his barrel and gave myself up for lost. We spent years tearing that section of Aspinwall to pieces, till, all of a sudden, Archie give a jump that landed me on his rump and pulled

Missing Page

Archie out of Aspinwall

out for more room. And did n't he go! It was scandalous, the way he flapped them bony legs of his. Once in a while he kicked up behind, and I made a fine bow. Every time that happened some polite Spaniard took off his hat to me, thinking I was a friend he had n't time to recognize.

I stayed with that mustang, somehow, until we come to a narrow alley. At the end of it a fearful fat Spaniard, with a Panama hat and a green umbrella, was crossing. I hollered to him to get out of the way, but the sight of me and Archie streaming in the breeze surprised him so he stood paralyzed. He made a fat man's hop for safety, too late. When we were fifteen feet from him, Archie threw a hand-spring, and I put my head, like a red buttonhole bouquet, plumb in the gentleman's vest.

"Assassin!" he cries, and fetches me a wipe with the green umbrella before he expires temporarily on the street.

Of course, there 's lots of things will damage

Plain Mary Smith

you worse than butting a stout gentleman; at the same time I went at him quick, and stopped quicker. This world was all a dizzy show, till the crowd came up, Jim, on his Pedro, leading. They were all there: all the revolutionists, all the women with babies, and all the dogs, down to the last pup. I could n't have had a bigger audience if I 'd done something to be proud of.

Some of 'em held on to the fat gentleman, who was yearning to draw my heart's blood with the green umbrella. Some of 'em stood and admired Archie, who was smacking his lips over some grass that grew on the side, and looked about as vicious as Mary and her little lamb; some of 'em come to help me—all conversed freely.

“Now, darn your buttons!” says Jim, “you might have been killed! Had n't been for Señor Martinez there, you would 'a' been. Did n't I tell you not to try it again—did n't I?”

It was quite true he had told me that very thing. At the same time, one of the least con-

Archie out of Aspinwall

soling things in this world, when a man 's made a fool of himself, is to have somebody come up and tell him he prophesied it. You 'd like to think it just happened that way. It breaks your heart to feel it 's like twice two.

I sat up and looked at Jim. "You told me all that," says I, "but what 's the matter with letting virtue be its own reward?"

Jim laughed and said he guessed I was not quite done yet. Then he introduced me to Mr. Martinez as the grateful result of a well-lined stomach applied at the proper time.

Martinez sheathed the green umbrella and extended the hand of friendship, like the Spanish gentleman he was.

"Ah me!" says he, "but you ride with furiosity! And," he adds thoughtfully, "your head is of a firmness." He waved his hand so the diamonds glittered like a shower. "A treefle—a leetle, leetle treeful," by which he meant trifle. "Now," says he, as if we 'd fin-

Plain Mary Smith

ished some important business, "shall we resuscitate?"

Jim said we would, so the whole crowd moved to where Santiago Christobal Colon O'Sullivan gave you things that lightened the shadows for the time being, and proceeded to resuscitate.

Inside, Mr. Martinez the Stout told the whole story between drinks. He was the horse, or me, or himself, or the consequences, as occasion required. I 'd have gone through more than that to see Mr. Martinez gallop the length of the saloon, making it clear to us how Archie acted. And when he was me, darned if he did n't manage to look like me, and when he was Archie he seemed to thin out and grow bony hip-joints immediately; Archie 'd nickered at sight of him. How in blazes a three-hundred-pound Spanish gentleman contrived to resemble a thin, red-headed six-foot-two New England kid and a bow-necked, cat-hammed mustang is an art beyond me. He did it; let it go at that.

Archie out of Aspinwall

Outside, the men went over it all. The women dropped their babies in the street, so they could have their hands free to talk. I think even the dogs took a shy at the story. Never were folks so interested. And, strange to Yankee eyes, not a soul laughed.

I learned then the reason why the Spanish-American incorporated the revolution in his constitution. It 's because of the scarcity of theaters. If there was a theater for every ten inhabitants, and plays written where everybody was a king, peace would settle on Spanish America like a green scum on a frog-pond.

Howsomever, I ain't going to jeer at those people. I got to like 'em, and, as far as that goes, we have little fool ways of our own that we notice when we get far enough away from home to see straight.

I did n't ride Archie out of Aspinwall. I went to a hotel, slept strictly on one side, and scrapped it out with the little natives of the Isthmus until morning.

Curious, how things go. After this first ex-

Plain Mary Smith

perience I should n't have said that riding a horse would grow on me until being without one made me feel as if I 'd lost the use of my legs. Water is all right. I like boats—I like about everything—but still, I think the Almighty never did better by man than when he put him on a horse. A good horse, open country—miles of it, without a stick or hole—a warm sun and a cool wind—can you beat it? I can't.

IX

ENTER BROTHER BELKNAP

I CAN slide over my first month's work quick. At least half of us have been boys once, and a good share of that half have run into the stiff proposition when they were boys. I carried on my back most of the trouble in that part of the country—they were a careless people. Jim give me my head and let me bump it into mistakes. "Find out" was his motto. "Don't ask the boss," and I found out, perspiring freely the while. I had to hire men and fire 'em, wrestle with the Spanish language, keep books, keep my temper, learn what a day's work meant, learn to handle a team, get the boys to pull together, and last, but not least, try to get the best of that cussed horse, Archie.

Plain Mary Smith

I can't tell which was the worst. I know this, though: while my sympathies are with the hired man, yet that season of getting along with him taught me that the boss's job is n't one long, sugar-coated dream, neither. If the hired man knew more, he 'd have less wrongs, and also, if he knew more, he would n't be a hired man. What that proves, I pass.

Keeping books wore down my proud spirit, too. I do hate a puttering job. It was all there, anyhow. Jim pulled at his mustache and wrinkled his manly brow when he first snagged on my bookkeeping. "What the devil is this item?" he 'd say. "*Francis Lopez borrowed a dollar on his pay; says his mother's sick. That's a lie, I bet.*" You must n't let the boys have money that way, Bill, and never mind putting your thoughts in the cash-book—save 'em for your diary."

I got the hang of it after a while, and one grand day my cash balanced. That was a moment to remember. I don't recall that it

Enter Brother Belknap

ever happened again. The store made most of my trouble. We handled all kinds of truck, from kerosene oil to a jews'-harp, through rough clothes and the hardware department. My helper was the lunkheadest critter God ever trusted outdoors. You 'd scarcely believe one man's head could be so foolish. At the same time the poor devil was kind and polite, and he needed the job so bad, I could n't fire him. But he took some of the color out of my hair, all right. He was a Mexican who talked English, so he was useful that way, anyhow. But Man! What the stuff cost was marked in letters—"Washington" was our cost-mark word. If the thing cost a dollar fifty, it was marked WIN, then you tacked on the profit. Well, poor Pedro used to forget all about the father of his country, if there came a rush, and as he did n't have any natural common sense, you could expect him to sell a barrel of kerosene for two bits and charge eight dollars for a paper of needles. When-

Plain Mary Smith

ever I heard wild cries of astonishment and saw the arms a-flying, I could be sure that Pedro had lost track of American history. He 'd make a statue of William Penn get up and cuss, that feller. I tried everything—wrote out the prices, gave him lists, put pictures of our George all over the store, swore at him till I was purple and him weeping in his pocket-handkerchief, calling the saints to witness how the memory of the G-r-r-eat Ouash-eeng-tong would never depart from his mind again, and in three minutes he 'd sell a twenty-five dollar Stetson hat for eighty-seven cents. It took a good deal of my time rushing around the country getting those sales back.

Then, when the confinement of the store told too much on my nerves and the gangs had all been looked up, I went to the corral and took a fall out of Archibald. Or, more properly speaking, I took a fall off Archibald. That horse was a complete education in the art of riding. I never since have struck anything,

Enter Brother Belknap

bronco, cayuse, or American horse, that did n't seem like an amateur 'longside of him. He 'd pitch for a half hour in a space no bigger than a dining-room table; then he 'd run and buck for another half hour. If you stuck so much out, he 'd kick your feet out of the stirrups, stick his ears in the ground, and throw a somersault. No man living could think up more schemes than that mustang, and you might as well try to tire a steam-engine. At the end of the first hour Archie was simply nice and limber; the second hour saw him getting into the spirit of it; by the third hour he was warmed up and working like a charm. I 'm guessing the third hour. Two was my limit.

All these things kept me from calling on my friends in town for some time, till Jim gave me three days off to use as I pleased. I put me on the tallest steeple hat with the biggest bells I could find; I had spurs that would do to harpoon a whale, and they had jinglers on 'em wherever a jingler would go. My necker-

Plain Mary Smith

chief was a heavenly blue, to match my hair, and it was considerably smaller than a horse-blanket. The hair itself had grown well down to my neck, and she 's never been cut from that day, except to trim the ends. In my sash I stuck a horse-pistol and a machete. Contact with the Spaniard had already corrupted me into being proud of my small feet, so I spent one hour getting my boots on, and oh, Lord! the misery of those boots! I tell you what it is, if one man or woman should do to another what that victim will do to himself, for Vanity's sake, the neighbors would rise and lynch the offender. When I worried those boots off at night, I 'd fall back and enjoy the blessed relief for five minutes without moving. It was almost worth the pain, that five minutes. I used to know a man who said he got more real value out of the two weeks his wife went to visit her mother than he did out of a year, before he was married.

But I looked great, you bet. Probably my

Enter Brother Belknap

expression was foolish, but I would n't mind feeling myself *such* a thumping hunk of a man once more, expression and all. And I rode a little mouse-colored American horse, with a cream mane and tail and two white feet forward,—a pretty, playful little cuss with no sin in him, as proud of me and himself as I was. There was only one more thing to make that trip complete, and about ten mile out of Panama I filled. Out of a side draw pops a blackavised road-agent, and informs me that he wants my money. I drew horse-pistol and machete and charged with a loud holler. That brigand shed his gun and threw his knees higher than his shoulders getting out of that. I paused and overtook him. He explained sadly and untruthfully that nothing but a starving wife and twenty-three children drove him to such courses. I told him the evil of his ways—no short story, neither. You bet I spread myself on that chance,—then I gave him two dollars for the family and rode my cheerful way. It

Plain Mary Smith

really is beautiful to think of anybody being so pleased with anything as I was with myself. And the story I had now to tell Mary! We did a fast ten mile into Panama.

I found the house where Mary boarded without much trouble. It was one of the old-fashioned Spanish houses where the upper stories stick out, although not like some of 'em, as it had a garden around it. A bully old house, with sweet-smelling vines and creepers and flowers, and statues and a fountain in the garden. The fountain only squirted in the rainy season, but it was good to look at. A garden with a fountain in it was a thing I 'd always wanted to see. Seemed to me like I could begin to believe in some of the stories I read, when I saw that.

Everything had a far-away look. For a full minute I could n't get over the notion that I 'd ridden into a story-book by mistake. So I sat on my horse and stared at it, glad I came, till a soft rush of feet on the grass and a voice I 'd often wanted to hear in the past month

Enter Brother Belknap

calling, "Why, Will! I was sure it was you!" made me certain of my welcome.

Now, I 'd been too busy to think much lately, but when my eyes fell on that beautiful girl, running to see me, glad to see me—eyes, mouth, and outstretched hands all saying she was glad to see me—I just naturally hopped off my horse, over the wall, and gathered her in both arms. She kissed me, frank and hearty, and then we shook hands and said all those things that don't mean anything, that people say to relieve their feelings.

Then she laughed and fixed her hair, eyeing me sideways, and she says: "I don't know that I should permit that from so large and ferocious looking a person. But perhaps it 's too late, so tell me everything—how do you get on with Mr. Holton? What are you doing? Why have n't I heard from you? I thought certainly you would n't desert me in this strange country for a whole month—I 've missed you awfully."

"Have you, Mary!" I said; "have you

Plain Mary Smith

really?" I could n't get over it, that she 'd missed me.

"I should say I had, you most tremendous big boy, you!" she says, giving me a little loving shake. "Do you suppose I 've forgotten all our walks and talks on the *Matilda*? And all your funny speeches? Oh, Will! I 've been homesick, and your dear old auburn locks are home!"

"Why, there 's Sax!" says I, in the innocence of my heart. "Has n't he been around?"

"I have n't seen much of Mr. Saxton," she answers, cooling so I felt the need of a coat—"and that 's quite different."

Well, I hustled away from the subject fast, sorry to know something was wrong between my friends, but too durned selfish to spoil my own greeting. I plunged into the history of Mr. William Saunders, from the time of leaving the *Matilda*. Mary was the most eloquent listener I ever met. She made a good story of whatever she harkened to.

Enter Brother Belknap

Well, sir, I had a pleasant afternoon. There was that story-book old house and garden, Mary and me at a little table, drinking lime-juice lemonade, me in my fine clothes out for a real holiday, smoking like a real man, telling her about the crimp I put in that road-agent.

Yes, I was having a glorious time, when the gate opened and a man came in. Somehow, from the first look I got of him I did n't like him. Something of the shadow that used to hang over home lay in that lad's black coat.

Mary's face changed. The life went out. Something heavy, serious, and tired came into it, yet she met the newcomer with the greatest respect. As they came toward me I stiffened inside. Mr. Belknap and Mr. Saunders shook hands. His closed upon mine firmly and coldly, like a machine. He announced that he was glad to meet me in a tone of voice that would leave a jury doubtful. We stood around, me embarrassed, and even Mary ill at ease, until he said: "Shall we not sit down?" Feeling

Plain Mary Smith

at school once more, down I sat. If he 'd said: "Shall we not walk off upon our ears?" I 'd felt obliged to try it.

He put a compulsion on you. He made you want to please him, though you hated him.

Well, there we sat. "Mr. Belknap is doing a wonderful work among these poor people," explained Mary to me. There was something prim in her speech that knocked another color off the meeting.

"You are too good," said Mr. Belknap. He was modest, too, in a way that reproached you for daring to talk of him so careless. I wished that Mr. Belknap would get to work on his poor people and leave us alone, but he had no such intention.

"Miss Smith," says he, "is one of those who credit others with the excellencies they believe in from possession."

Mary colored, and a little frown I could not understand lay on her forehead for the second. It was curious, that man's way. When he

Enter Brother Belknap

made his speech it was like he put a rope upon the girl. I did n't see much meaning to it, except a compliment, but I felt something behind it, and suddenly I understood her frown. It was the way you look when something you feel you ought to do, that you 've worked yourself into believing you want to do, although at the bottom of your heart you 'd chuck it quick, comes up for action.

I 'd have broken into the talk if I could, but Brother Belknap had me tongue-tied, so I just sat, wishful to go, in spite of Mary, and unable to start. It seemed like presuming a good deal to leave, or do anything else Mr. Belknap had n't mentioned.

We talked like advice to the young in the third reader. Mr. Belknap announced his topics and smiled his superior knowledge. I 'd have hit him in the eye for two cents, and at the same time if he told me to run away like a good little boy, darned if I don't believe I 'd

Plain Mary Smith

done it—me, that chased the road-agent up the valley not three hours before!

Mary moved her glass in little circles and looked off into distance. Something of the change from our first being together, to this, was working in her. “It is hard,” she said, trying to pass it off lightly, “to bear the weight of virtues that don’t belong to me!”

Mr. Belknap leaned forward. He was a heavy-built, easy-moving man; you had to grant him a kind of elegance that went queer enough with the preacher-air he wore of his own will. He put his head out and looked at her. I watched him close, and I saw a crafty, hard light in his eyes as if the tiger in him had come for a look out of doors. He purred soft, like a tiger. “Nowhere is humility more becoming than in a beautiful woman.”

At that minute his hold on me snapped. Believing him honest, he had me kiboshed—seeing that expression, which, I suppose, he did n’t think worth while hiding from a gawky kid—I

Enter Brother Belknap

was my own man again, hating him and ready for war with him, in a blaze. Too young to understand much about love-affairs and the like of that, I still knew those eyes, that had shifted in a second from pompous piety to cunning, meant no good to Mary.

“I don’t know about humility,” says I, “but I ’ll go bail for Mary’s honesty.” I laid my hand on hers as I spoke. Funny that I did that and spoke as I did. It came to me at once, without thinking—like I ’d been a dog and bristled at him for a sure-enough tiger.

Mary was n’t the kind to go back on a friend in any company. She put her other hand on mine and said: “That ’s the nicest thing you could say, Will.”

Mr. Belknap did n’t like it. He swung around as if he found me worth more attention than at first, and when our eyes met he saw I was on to him, bigger than a wolf. All he changed was a quick tightening of the lips. We looked at each other steady. He ought

Plain Mary Smith

to have showed uneasiness, consarn him, but he did n't. Instead he smiled, like I was amusing. I loved him horrible for that—me and my steeple hat and sash to be amusing!

“You have a most impulsive nature, Mr. Saunders,” says he.

I wanted to tell him he was entirely correct, and that I 'd like to chase two rascals the same day. I had sense enough not to, but said:

“I 'm not ashamed to own it—particularly where Mary 's concerned.”

“Ah!” he says, raising his eyebrows, “you are old friends?”

“Not so very *old*,” says Mary. “That seems cold—we 're very warm, young friends.”

“It is pleasant for the young to have friends,” says he.

“That 's hardly as surprising a remark as your face led me to expect,” says I. “It 's pleasant for *anybody* to have friends.”

It was his turn not to be overjoyed. I hid my real meaning under a lively manner for

Enter Brother Belknap

Mary's benefit, and while perhaps she did n't like my being quite so frivolous to the overpowering Mr. Belknap, she saw no harm in the speech. He did, though.

“Am I to count you among my friends?” says he.

“Any friend of Mary's is a friend of mine,” I answered. He took. “Then that is assured,” he says, with his smoothest smile.

We all waited.

“Ah, Youth!” says Mr. Belknap, with a look at Mary, and an explaining, indulgent smile at me. “How heartening it is to see its readiness, its resource in the untried years! Rejoice in your youth and strength, my young friend!—as for me—” he stopped and looked so grave he near fooled me again. “I am worn down so I barely believe in hope. My poor, commonplace ambitions, my dull idea of duty puts me out of the pale of friendship entirely—I have nothing pleasant to offer my friend.”

Plain Mary Smith

“Oh, no! Mr. Belknap!” says Mary. “How can you speak like that? With your great work—how can you call it dull? I ’m sure it is a high privilege to be listed with your friends!”

I felt a chill go over me—the whole business was tricky, stagy; of a piece with the highfalutin talk. Belknap was no old man, not a day over forty, and powerful as a bull, by the look of him, yet the tone of his voice, the air he threw around it, made him the sole and lonely survivor of a great misfortune, without a helping hand at time of need.

I felt mad and disgusted with Mary for being taken in. I had yet to learn that even the best of women are easy worked through the medium of making ’em feel they are the support of a big man. They ’ll take his word for his size, and swallow almost anything for the fun of supporting him. Saxton made the great mistake of admitting his foolishnesses to be foolish, and swearing at ’em; he should have

Enter Brother Belknap

sadly regretted them as accidents. A woman has to learn a heap before she can appreciate a thoroughly honest man. There is a poetry in being honest, but like some kinds of music, it takes a highly educated person to enjoy it. Sing to the girls in a sweet and melancholy voice about a flower from your angel mother's grave, and most of 'em will forget you never contributed a cent to the angel mother's support—and it ain't that they like honesty the less, but romance the more, as the feller said about Julius Cæsar. But when a woman like Mary does get her bearings she has 'em for keeps.

Now Sax was a durned sight more romantic really than this black-coated play-actor, but he would insist on stripping things to the bones, and the sight of the skeleton—good, honest, flyaway man frame that it was—scart Mary.

It came across me bitter that she looked at Brother Belknap the way she did. I got up.

Plain Mary Smith

“I must go,” I says.

“Why, Will! won’t you stay to supper? I thought you surely would.”

“No,” I says, “I ’ve got another friend here it ’s time to remember—I ’ll take supper with Arthur Saxton.”

Mary looked very confused and bothered. Belknap shot his eyes from her to me and back again, learning all he could from our faces. And in a twinkle I knew that he was the cause, through lies or some kind of devilry, of the coolness between Mary and Arthur Saxton.

The blood went to the top of my head.

“Good-by, Mr. Belknap,” I says, “we ’ll meet again.”

“I most certainly hope so,” says he, bowing and smiling most polite.

“You keep that hope green, and not let it get away from you like the rest of ’em, and it sure will happen,” says I. I turned and looked hard at Mary. “Have you any message for Arthur?” I asked her.

Enter Brother Belknap

She bit her lips, and glanced at Belknap. "No," says she, short, "I have no message for Mr. Saxton."

"Too bad," says I. "He was a good friend of yours." With that I turned and stalked off. She followed me, and caught me gently by the sleeve.

"You 're not angry at me, Will? I 'm all alone here, you know."

I had it hot on my tongue to tell her I was angry plenty, but it crossed my mind how that would play into Belknap's hand, whatever scheme he was working, for Mary would n't stand too much from anybody; so, with an unaccountable rush of sense to the brain, I said:

"Not angry, Mary, but jarred, to see you go back on a friend."

"Will, you don't understand! It is not I who have gone back—who have been unfriendly to Mr. Saxton, it is he who has put it out of my power to be his friend—I can't even tell you—you must believe me."

Plain Mary Smith

“Did *he* tell *you* this?” I asked her.

“No,” she said.

“Well, until he does, I ’d as soon believe Arthur as Mr. Belknap.”

“Mr. Belknap! How did you know—why, what do you mean, Will?”

“I mean that I don’t like Belknap a little bit,” said I most unwisely. “And I do like you and Saxton.”

“You don’t know Mr. Belknap, and you are very unreasonable,” she said, getting warm.

“Unreasonable enough to be afire all over at the thought of any one cheating you, Mary—will you excuse that?”

I held out my hand, but she gave me a hug. “I ’m not going to pretend to be angry at you, for I can’t,” she said. “‘You do not love me—no? So kiss me good-by, and go!’ One minute, Will, may I speak to you as if you really were my brother?”

“I should say you could.”

“Well, then, will you promise me that in

Enter Brother Belknap

this place you will do nothing, nor go anywhere with Arth—with any one that would make me ashamed to treat you as I do? Will you keep yourself the same sweet, true-hearted boy I have known, for your mother's sake, and for my sake?"

Her eyes had filled with tears. I 'd have promised to sit quietly on a ton of dynamite until it went off—and kept my word at that.

"I promise, Mary," says I.

"Will, boy, I love you," she said, "and I love you because there 's nothing silly in that honest red head of yours to misunderstand me. I want to be your dear sister—and to think that you might, too—" She broke off, and the tears overflowed.

Looking at her, a hard suspicion of Saxton jolted me. I did n't know a great deal of the crooked side, but, of course, I had a glimmer, and it struck me that if he had been cutting up bad, when he pretended to care for this girl, he needed killing.

Plain Mary Smith

“Tell me, Mary,” I asked her, “has Arthur—”

“Hush, Will—I can tell you nothing. You must see with your own eyes. And here ’s a kiss for your promise—which will be kept! And to-morrow at three you ’re to be here again.”

And off I goes up the road sitting very straight, and I tell you, if it had n’t been for the mean suspicion of Saxton, what with the mouse-colored horse waving his cream mane and tail, my new steeple hat, the sash with a gun and machete in it, the spurs jingling, the memory of having chased a fierce road-agent to a finish, and the kiss of the most beautiful woman in the world on my lips, I ’d been a medium well-feeling sort of boy. I guess my anxiety about Saxton did n’t quite succeed in drowning the other, neither. You can’t expect too much of scant eighteen.

X

“YOUR LIFE, IF YOU HURT HIM!”

I HAD N'T thought to ask what Saxton was at in a business way. I did n't know where to find him; there was no use in going back, so I rode at random through the streets.

As I swung into a dark alley I came upon a fierce and quiet little fight. Two men set upon a third, who had his back against the wall. The knives flashed, they ducked, parried, got away, cut and come again with a quickness and a savageness that lifted my hair. Jeeminy! There was spirit in that row! And not a sound except the soft sliding of feet and the noise of blows. They 'd all been touched, too; red showed here and there on them, as well as on the stones.

Plain Mary Smith

While I looked the one man slipped and came down on his back, striking his head and his right elbow, the knife flying out of his hand.

I breathed quicker—some fights make you feel warlike—and when I see the other two dive right at the man, down and helpless, I broke the silence and the peace at one and the same instant. The mouse-colored horse butted a lad sailing down the alley. I grabbed the other up on the saddle and cuffed him with all my heart.

“You dirty Mut!” says I. “Two of you on one man! Have something with me,” and I slapped his black face to a blister. He tried to get at me with the knife, but a pinch on the neck loosened his grip.

The feller the little horse rammed got on his feet, looking like he was going to return for a minute; it was me against the two. I crowded my victim down against the saddle with my left hand—Lord! how he squawked!—and drew my gun with the right. “Take either way that



“I crowded my victim down against the saddle
with my left hand ”

“Your Life, if You Hurt Him!”

suits you,” says I. The bucko did n’t sabe English, maybe, but a forty-four gun is easy translated in any language. He chose the other end of the alley.

The feller that fell got on his feet. He was a good-looking chap, in spite of a big scar across his face and the careless way his white clothes were daubed with red.

“*Mushisimas gracias, Señor,*” says he, “*me alegro mucho de ver a usted.*”

“Don’t mention it,” says I. “I understand a little Spanish, but I speak English. I would n’t have cut in if they had n’t played it crooked on you—here ’s your boy, not damaged much, if you want to have it out.”

“I spike Anglish verree splendidlee,” says he, “I th-thank ju. Eef you weel so kindly han’ me dthat man, I keel heem.”

“Holy Christmas!” says I—he asked as cool as he would a light for his cigar—“What do you mean? Just *stick* him?”

“*Certamente,*” says he, “he ees no good.”

Plain Mary Smith

I chucked my victim as far as I could throw him. "Run, you fool!" I says, and he scuttled out of that like a jack-rabbit.

He was gone before my friend could start after him. I got the full blast of the disappointment.

"I do not quite understand, Señor," says he, with his hand on his knife.

"Hold!" says I, "you 've no call to jump me—I can't stand for a man being slit in cold blood—no offense meant."

"I forget your service," says he. "Pardon—here ees my han'." We shook hands. "But you have made the foolish thing," he says. "There ees a man who ees to be keeled dead, and you let heem go—that ees more foolish as to let the Fer-de-lance free."

"Well, I know," says I, "I suppose you 're right, but my ideas ain't quite foreign enough yet."

He smiled. "Your largeness made me mistake," says he. "I see you are a gentleman not

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of so many years, but of the heart strong and the arm stronger—you play with that man—chuckee—chuckee—chuckee—like hees mother. Eet was lovelee. May I ask the name?”

“William De La Tour Saunders,” says I, “commonly called Bill.”

“Ah, Beel!” says he, “I r-r-remember. Here is Antonio Oriñez—your frien’ when you wish.”

“Well, Mr. Oriñez,” says I, “had n’t we better be walking along? You ’re bleeding pretty free.”

“*Ta!*” says he, shrugging his shoulders. “I am used to eet—still, I go. Thees ees not a healthy land for me.”

“What was the row about?” I asked, my kid curiosity coming up.

“I cannot tell even my best frien’,” he answers, smiling so pleasant there was no injury. “*Quiere poquito de aguardiente?*”

“No,” I says, “I ’m not drinking at present

Plain Mary Smith

—it 's a promise I made.” (Oh, the vanity of a boy!) “But I 'll trot along with you.”

He shook his head. “Do not,” he says, “believe me, I have reason—can I do you any service, now?”

I was a little anxious to get on my own business. The lull from the fight had come in the shape of a seasick feeling.

“Do you know a man by the name of Saxton?” I inquired.

He gave me a quick look—a friendly look, “Arthur Saxton—tall—grande—play the violen like the davi?”

“That 's him.”

“Around that corner, not far, on thees side,” waving his left hand, “you see the name—eet ees a es-store for food.”

I was surprised enough to find that Sax had opened a grocery store.

“Thanks,” says I, and swung in the saddle. Oriñez raised a hand, playful.

“Geeve me some other ho-r-r-r-se!” says he.

“Your Life, if You Hurt Him!”

“Bin’ opp my wounds!” he laughed. “By-by, Beel, r-remember me, as I shall remember ju!”

“Good-by, Mr. Oriñez,” says I. He called after me, “Eef you need a frien’, there is Oriñez!”

“Same to you, old man!” I says, and swings around the corner.

Saxton was working outside the store, over-seeing the unloading of some wagons. It was a large store, with a big stock, and Sax was busy as a hound-pup at a rabbit-hole. I rubbed my eyes. Somehow the last thing I expected to see Sax was a storekeeper. I slipped up and put my hands on his shoulders to surprise him. It surprised him all right. I felt the muscles jump under the coat, although he stood still enough, and he whirled on me with an ugly look in his eye.

I think, perhaps, of all the unpleasant positions a man can get himself into, that of a playful friendly fit gone wrong will bring the sweat out the quickest—you do feel such a fool!

Plain Mary Smith

“Beg your pardon, Arthur,” says I, fairly cool, as really I had n’t done anything for him to get so wrathful about.

But he got the best of himself at once, and the old, kind smile came, taking out the lines that changed his face so.

“What are you talking about?” says he, playful in his turn—forced playful, painful to see. He gave me a slap on the back and I let her flicker at that—always willing to take a friend’s intentions rather than the results. I never went into friendship as a money-making business.

“I thought I startled you,” I said. He laughed loud, so loud that I looked at him and backed away a little. “Startled me!” he says. “What nonsense! When did you come in? How do you like your job? Going to stay long?”

He fired these questions at me as fast as he could talk. I, dumb-struck, answered somehow, while I felt around for something to think with.

“Your Life, if You Hurt Him!”

He was here and there and all over, doing everything with the same fever-hurry. Popping a string of questions at me and away before I could answer the half of them, as if he could n't hold his mind to one thing more than a minute—and this was Arthur Saxton!

Part of my mind talked to him, part wrestled with Mary's hints and the other part kept up a wondering why and what, for I felt for that man a whole-hearted kid's worship.

A sack of flour fell from the wagon and split. Instantly Sax broke out into a fit of cursing. I never heard anything like it. He cursed the flour, the man that dropped it, Panama, the business, and everything above and below, his eyes two balls of wild-fire.

The man jumped back scared. Sax's jaws worked hard; he got back an outside appearance of humanity.

“This heat makes me irritable, Bill,” he said. “Besides, there 's lots of annoyance in a new business.”

“Sure,” says I. I saw the flour sack was

Plain Mary Smith

only an excuse—a little hole to let out the strain. A person's wits will outfoot his judgment sometimes. I had no experience to guide me, yet I knew Saxton needed humoring.

I 've heard people say that things—like liquor, for instance—could n't get the best of such and such a man, because he was strong-willed. What kind of argument is that? Suppose he *wants* to drink. Ain't his strong will going to make him drink just that much harder, and be that much harder to turn back, than a man with a putty spine? The only backbone some men has is what their neighbors think. Them you can handle. But the man that rules himself generally finds it quite different from being the lady boss of an old woman's home. Just because he 's fit to rule, he 'll rebel, and he 'll scrap with himself till they put a stone up, marking the place of a drawn battle. But the neighbors won't know it. They 'll envy him the dead easy time he had, or get mad

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when he does something foolish—loses one heat out of many that the neighbors did n't even dare to run—and gossip over him. “Who 'd think a man that 's lived as good a life as Mr. Smith would,” and so forth. But you can't blame the neighbors neither. Most people reasonably prefer peace to war, and with a man like Sax it 's war most of the time. You have to care a heap to stay with him.

Well, he was in a bad way for sure. He talked fast—often not finishing what he had to say. He laughed a great deal, too, and when the laugh passed and the dreary look came on his face again, it was enough to make you shiver.

Presently a nice little man came up—a Spaniard and a gentleman.

From the time I took hold of his hand I felt more cheerful. You knew by his eye he understood things.

Sax introduced him as an old friend and as his partner in the business. “Perez puts up

Plain Mary Smith

the money and the experience," says he, "and I put up a bold front."

"After I 've begged you not to speak in that way?" says Perez, smiling, but reproachful.

"I 'm not sailing under false colors," says Sax, sharp. "You 've made an asylum for an empty head—you 'll have to listen to it."

Perez dropped the subject at once.

The Spaniard turned to me and asked me most courteously about my aims in the country. We were talking along when Saxton interrupted us. "We 'll never get enough to drink this way," says he; "come into the office."

We went back into the little room where they entertained the big customers. Saxton called a boy and ordered brandy. When it came he grabbed the bottle feverishly. As he did so, Perez glanced at me. We understood each other.

Sax could n't drink until we joined him—habit again—how she pulls! He wanted that drink. It was the one thing he did want in the

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world, yet there he waited while we fooled away as much time as we could.

“Well, here ’s regards!” he said at last, and his lower jaw trembled with eagerness. Perez drank and I made the motions.

“That ’s the stuff!” says Sax, with a cheap swagger that knocked me harder than anything I ’d seen so far. “The good old truck that you Spaniards mollify under the name of *aguardiente* is the solution of all problems, Perez.”

“*Si, si, Señor?*” says Perez. “It is a great solvent.” He stirred the red sugar in the bottom of his glass. “I have seen it dissolve many a good manhood—like that.”

“None of your friends, I hope?” sneers Sax.

“I hope not.”

Saxton looked at him a minute; a hundred different fits showed in his eye, but the hurry of his mind let none stay long enough for action.

The shadow settled on him again. I never

Plain Mary Smith

in my life saw more misery in a human face, and to save me I could n't tell you where the expression came from, because the man kept his muscles in an iron grip. There was n't a droop of the mouth, nor a line in the forehead, nor a twitch of the eye—it was just powerful enough to make itself felt, without signs.

He came back again with a snap.

“Why, you 're not drinking, Bill!” says he, noticing my glass. It was not Arthur Saxton, to urge a boy to drink.

“No,” I says, easy, “I 'm not used to tropical beverages—I expect to find it full of red peppers. Lord, what a dose I got in my first *chile con carne*—”

He cut into my attempt at a diversion.

“Why don't you drink?” he asked.

“Because I promised Mary not to.”

The mention of the name was too much. He took a quick breath.

“Oh, I would n't mind that,” he says, light

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enough on the outside, but beginning to heat up inside again.

“I mind my word,” I answered.

Perez looked quickly across at me and smiled.

“She makes mistakes like the rest of us,” says Saxton.

“She makes mistakes,” says I, “but *not* like the rest of us.”

Perez stretched out his hand. “I am again glad to have met Mr. Saunders,” he said.

Sax looked from one to the other of us. Suddenly he sprang up, giving the table such a push it landed on its back against the wall. “I hate to be the *only* blackguard in the party,” he said, and stood furious, panting.

Perez slipped to me and whispered, “Mind him not—for two weeks, day and night, brandy, brandy, brandy—it has not drunken him—but the man is mad.”

“What are you whispering about?” demanded Sax, so savagely I got ready for ac-

Plain Mary Smith

tion. "If you 've anything to say about me, let me hear it—I yearn for interesting news." He had his fist drawn back as he came up to Perez.

The little man's face went white. "Arthur," he said, "would you strike me?"

"I 'd strike any one—any dirty sneak who 'd talk about me behind my back."

"Arthur," said Perez, slowly, "when I was a poor, sickly, sad little boy at a Northern school I had a friend who protected me, who took many a blow for my sake; when I was a young man, sick with *la viruela*, I had a friend who risked his life to save mine; as an older man, I have a friend who can take my life if he wishes—strike."

And so help me! He would have struck! Never tell me a man is this and that. A man is everything. In his right mind, nothing an Apache invented would have forced Arthur Saxton to do such a thing—no fear on earth, nor no profit on earth would have tempted

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him for an instant. But now he would have struck.

I grabbed his wrist.

“You fool!” I cried, “what are you doing?” He clipped me bang in the eye. Saxton was a strong man, weakened by whisky. I was twice as strong and braced with rage.

I whirled him around and slammed him on the floor.

Something cold pressed against my temple. It was a revolver in the hands of Perez. “Your life for it, if you hurt him,” said he.

For a second, I meant to quit that place in disgust. Then the size of it took hold of me. It does n’t matter whether a thing is wise or not—in fact, you never can tell whether a thing is wise or not—but if it has a size to it, it suits me.

I thought for a minute. There we stood, me holding Saxton, Perez holding me—just that little, cold touch, you ’d think might be pleasant on a hot day.

Plain Mary Smith

“I hope you ain’t nervous, Mr. Perez?” says I, to gain time.

“What?” says he, kind of befuzzled. “No, I am not nervous.”

“That ’s right,” says I, hearty. “Don’t try to see how hard that trigger pulls, or you ’ll disturb my thoughts.” Then I made up my mind.

“Saxton,” says I, “if there ’s a remnant in you of the man you once was, get your friend to leave, and take the licking you deserve.”

I looked down at him—the man was back again! Talk about your moral suasion, I tell you there ’s a time when only one thing counts. I ’d done more for Arthur Saxton by slamming him down on the floor than the doctors and preachers could have brought about in ten years. He went down *hard*, mind you. Yes, sir, there was the old Saxton, with his forehead frowned up because his head hurt, but the old, kindly, funny little smile on his lips.

“Perez,” he said, “run away and let the bad

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little boy get his spanking—although, Bill,” he went on, “if it ’s reformation you ’re after, I don’t need it.” He laughed up at me. “You think I ’m trying to dodge payment, but, so help me, I ’m not, Billy boy.”

To see him like that, his laughing self again, after the nightmare we ’d just been through, set me to sniveling—darn it, I was excited and only a kid, but I cried—yes, I cried. And Perez, he cried.

“N-nice way for you to act,” says I, “and s-spoil all a poor boy ’s got to respect.”

The awful slush of that struck us all, and we broke out into a laugh together—a wibbly kind of laugh, but it served.

Arthur got up and dusted his clothes. He shook fearfully. I never saw a man in worse shape and still be able to stand. Two weeks of a steady diet of French brandy on top of trouble will put a man outside the ordinary run, or inside his long home.

It was fine, the way he gathered himself.

Plain Mary Smith

He brought something like what he ought to be out of the wreck in two minutes.

“Now,” he says steady, “I owe you fellows something—I owe you a great deal, Perez—I ’d started to finish on the alcohol route. I don’t like the company I keep. If I ’m going to die I ’ll die with a better man than you stopped, Bill. In fact, I think my kid fit is over. I reckon I ’ll try to live like a man, and as a start I ’m going to tell you both what ails me—to have it out for once. So help me, it is n’t for myself—it ’s for you, Henry. You ’ve invested time and money in me, and you sha’n’t lose it. If you know what you ’re up against, you may be able to help me help myself. I ’m sick of myself. All my life I have kept my mouth shut, out of a foolish pride. The little sacrifice will be something on the altar of friendship, Henry, old man. Come along to my room.”

XI

SAXTON'S STORY

WE seated ourselves around the table in Saxton's bedroom.

"Perez," said Saxton, "you know from the beginning the boy and girl love affair between me and Mary Smith. It was no small thing for me. I cared then and I care now. I think the one thing which stood between Mary and myself as the greatest point of difference was my trick of stripping things to the bare facts. She liked romance, whether fact or not; I liked the romance that lay in fact. She cared for me—that is certain, but some reports when I was about nineteen to the effect that I was raising the devil, and had led a weak-headed fellow astray with me, seemed to give the girl a per-

Plain Mary Smith

manent twist against me. Now here 's the truth. In our little town we had a number of men who earned comfortable fortunes and then laid back. Their boys, with nothing to do and nothing in their heads, acted as one might suppose. They took to drinking and gambling, not because they were bad but simply to pass the time; the town was dull enough, God knows. Pretty soon the wilder crowd became an open scandal. Among them were some of my best friends, and I went with 'em, with as sincere a desire to line 'em up with decency again as any long-faced deacon in the town; but instead of spouting piety, I thought I would play their game until I could get 'em to play mine, that is, I took a drink with 'em, and I played some poker with 'em, all the while trying to show the strongest head and the most checks when it came to 'cash-up' in the poker game. I felt that if I could beat 'em, what I said would go.

“There was one mean scoundrel in the

Saxton's Story

bunch—a hypocrite to the marrow. He really was to blame for the worst outbreaks, but he pulled the long face when among respectable people. I wanted to get the best of that lad. If you 're going to lead drinking men and gamblers, you 've got to be the best drinker and the best card player in the bunch. The rest were empty-headed boys, who 'd have taken up religion as quickly as faro bank, if some one led 'em to it. Well, I think I 'd won out, if my friend the hypocrite, who was foxy enough in his way, had n't back-capped me, by telling the town the evil of my ways. The first break was with my father. The news came to him carefully prepared. When I tried to explain my side, the disgusted incredulity of his face stopped me almost before I began. Father gave me my choice: to leave his house or to leave the company I kept. I cannot bear to be doubted. I made a choice. I left both the house and the company I kept. Father had been good to me; knowing how he felt, I would

Plain Mary Smith

not disgrace him. Then I made my living with my fiddle.

“Mary at first believed in me, but they talked her out of it. If she ’d doubted of her own mind, I would n’t have cared so much, but to know me as she did, and then prefer the word of outsiders—well, I roared at her like a maniac; it was much like now, as sweetly reasonable and all. No wonder the girl was frightened. I have n’t a doubt she felt that entertaining an interest for me was little better than criminal. At the same time the interest was there, and, like myself, she took a middle course by plunging with what heart she could into a dreary and hide-bound church. I drove her to it, and I paid the bill. If I could bring one half the sense into my own affairs that I can into some outside thing, I suppose I should sometime succeed. A little coaxing, an appeal for sympathy,—any show of gentleness on my part might have brought her round.—As we are, we are. I demanded, and here am I.

Saxton's Story

“I made it up with father afterwards; he did n't understand, but he believed. You see I would n't take a cent from him. He offered me money, but I said flat that as I did n't please him, I would n't take it. Father had been a business man all his days, and money had become his measure. If I refused money I meant business. That 's no sneer—a good old man was my father. But Mary stood me off. When I 'm not despairing, I know she cares. I have learned how much conventions mean to a woman—well, I don't blame 'em. I wish I had a few conventions against which I could lean and rest this minute. Then comes a man named Belknap—”

“Why, I have just met him, Saxton,” said I.

“Did you, Bill? I am thankful for it. I have gotten so my heart aches for facts to back me. What is your judgment on the gentleman?”

“Smooth as a sausage skin,” says I.

Plain Mary Smith

“All of that,” says Saxton; “he is one subtle scoundrel.”

“But he is n’t so hard to get on to, neither!”

“For a man, no,” says Saxton; “but Belknap has information that you, nor Perez, nor I, nor any man who is a man has, and that is the difference between a woman’s thinking and a man’s thinking. We know a man will swallow all manner of guff in politics; he ’ll buy a gold brick from a cheap blatherskite. That sort of thing is man’s folly. I don’t pretend to understand women’s follies, but Belknap does. He can talk such nonsense to a seemingly sensible woman that you fancy she ’s laughing at him, and behold! when you look to see the smile, you find the lady in tears.

“When he came into the game he was young. He took an instant interest in Mary, and at once used his smooth tongue, and his perfect knowledge of a woman’s character, to win her. He worked through her vanity, through her virtues, and through all the avenues his pecu-

Saxton's Story

liar intelligence opened to him. He gained her attention from the first, and now his power over her is something horrible to me. Again, had it not been my own affair, how easily I could have beaten him! If only my head and not my heart were in it—yet, I do not care for the game when my heart is n't in it, so where I don't care, I don't even try. This makes a jolly life.

“Our friend, Belknap, has a great work to do, converting these heathen Catholics to the Protestant faith, for which he has schools and missions, and for which also he needs teachers, and later, a wife, so Mary leaves home for here. Of course, he has n't breathed a word of anything but the Great Work, and his lonely struggle, and queer as it is, and scoundrel that he is, I know he partly believes in himself. Sentimental advances would frighten her off. He bides his time, does Mr. Spider, and lets habit of mind crush out all the girl's natural instincts until she has no resource but him.”

Plain Mary Smith

“I thought you said he was of a deep understanding in regard to the women?” said Perez.

“He is.”

“And he will suppress the natural feelings?”

“Yes.”

“Mine has been a lonely life, Arthur, of reality,” said Perez; “*you* are my affection—but when the Senor Belknap has suppressed the natural feelings of any woman, he has but to ask, and my store, and my ranches, and my cattle are his.”

Saxton shook his head wearily. “You don’t know him, Enrique.”

“I have interrupted,” said Perez; “pardon!”

“There is this much more,” said Saxton. “On the trip across I saw I had regained some of my standing in Mary’s eyes, enough, at least, to send me up into cloudland. My heart went out to every creature I saw, and I certainly was a fool not to know I ’d do something idiotic. I did it. One night, walking from the store, a

Saxton's Story

woman stopped and spoke to me. Ordinarily I would have pushed on as easily as might be, but in this woman a hint of delicacy still lingered. There was something in her face that shone like the last of day, in the way she carried herself, in the way she held her head, there was still womanly pride; in short, she was the one out of a thousand for whom there is hope. She came straight to me out of the crowd, with the same faith a dog has often shown me. That is the kind of thing against which I am defenseless, and I am glad of it. Her story was short, plain, honest. She excused nothing, she made no attempt to put herself in a better light. No man could have talked squarer or more to the point; she was tired of the life she led, she had an impulse to change, she did not know whether the impulse would last or not, she had not a cent, but if I would help her she would make an effort. No man with a heart in his body is going to refuse an appeal like that. You know I am not quite

Plain Mary Smith

a boy to be fooled by whining. I realized the chances against her lasting out, and so did she. The thing was genuine, whatever the result. It appeared to me that to hand her money as you 'd throw a plate of cold fodder to a tramp, was not just the proper course of a man who thought of himself as a gentleman. Also I admit that I fancied myself standing as somewhat of a hero in Mary's eyes. So I treated my poor new friend as though she were a decent woman. I never preached at her,—I had had enough of preaching,—but simply gave her a 'good day,' and if a kind word once in a while had any weight, she got it. There was nothing in all this I could not have explained to Mary to my own credit. I did not like the kind of thing that woman stood for. She had no attraction for me in any way, shape, or manner, but Mr. Belknap saw his opportunity. He has this town plastered with spies; your house is no safeguard against his meddling. When he found out, he gave Mary a revised edition of my conduct. I can imagine him doing it—his

Saxton's Story

sorrowfully deploring my fall; the insinuations more damaging than any bald statement; the sighs and half-finished sentences. He had the start and he used it well. When I next went to see Mary I got a queer reception; among other pleasant things, she said my coming was an insult, and for the soft answer that turneth away wrath she replied that I had degraded myself beyond hope, when I asked her what in the world was the matter. Of course, I went crazy on the instant; the surprise of it took away what little sense I had. A minute's time and I might have gathered wits to present my case—”

Here old Sax got excited again. He looked at both of us, as if he thought that we doubted him.

“I tell you again,” he said, “that that other woman was nothing to me at all, except a poor pitiful creature that I would have been a brute not to help. I am speaking honestly as a man to his two friends—”

“Arthur,” said Perez, “to me you need

Plain Mary Smith

never justify, need never explain; if you say so, that is all, the rest is wasted time.”

“Here, too,” says I.

It would stagger anybody to see how poor Saxton wanted us to believe him. I began to see how he had poisoned his life. He looked at us very thankfully, but tears came into his eyes. He tried to go on in the calm way, but his throat was husky. Then he swore out free and felt better.

“To save time, I believe you in turn,” he said. “Another of my tricks is to wish to be believed in myself, and yet always doubt other people. Well, I lost my grip; I cannot remember all I said to Mary, but I can easily remember that it was all unpleasant. I simply improved on the Almighty’s handiwork by making a longer-eared jackass of myself than I was intended to be, winding up as a master-stroke by attacking Belknap. It was only two days before, Perez, that Oriñez had told me the other side of Belknap’s Great Work; of

Saxton's Story

how he was undoing all that you and Oriñez had done for the salvation of this unlucky country, by starting up a revolution in order that a lot of poor devils might be killed for his private benefit. I laid it on hard in my fury, and Mary told me to leave. She said she didn't want to be a witness of my descending so low as to attack an honorable man behind his back,—and then I came away. The Lord knows I have no memory of that walk home; everything that was bad in my blood came out. Honest, I fought—that is to say, I had lucid intervals of an hour or so, but every day my sense wore blunt under the grind of despair. It was a disease; it would come on me in waves like an ague fit. I really suffered physically; I lost every bit of decency that ever was in me; I became a God-forsaken, devil-ridden brute; a quart of French brandy a day did me no especial good, and yet I loved the stuff for the time. Well, the disease, like any disease, had to reach its climax. It came when I

Plain Mary Smith

started to strike you, Henry—that was the limit of meanness for any living man. Then old Bill here took hold of me, and squeezed what was left of the obsession out of me with the first hug of his arms. For the expulsion of devils, I recommend your long flippers, Bill, my boy. . . .

“I am not going to apologize to you, Henry, nor to Bill. If I did n’t feel something more than any apology could make good, I would n’t be worth your trouble. But right here I shift.”

We sat still. Seldom you see a man take out his soul: when that happens, it is usually a kind of indecent exposure. A man must shake every glimmer of vanity out.

Old Saxton stood out naked and unashamed like a statue. Nobody felt embarrassed. I was too young to appreciate it fully, although I did in a measure. I saw that all he wanted was to be honest. Not a word altered to win either sympathy or approval for himself. I

Saxton's Story

suppose that is the way the woman he spoke of attracted him.

Perez spoke very gently and cautiously.

“This is all strange to me, Arthur,” he said; “I am trying to understand. You seem so strong, of the head so remarkably clear and capable, that it is a difficulty to understand this trouble. I ask now, if you put a restraint upon yourself, will not—pardon, you know I only ask for good—”

Sax threw both arms in the air. “For God’s sake, and for both our sakes, Henry, don’t quiddle with courtesy—slam out with it! I’ve lost all right to consideration—you can only give me self-respect by showing you believe me man enough to hear what you have to say.”

That slow smile lit up Perez’s eyes. “Quite right, Arthur,” he said. “‘*Me he equivocado*’—this, then: If you restrain yourself, like the volcano, will you not break out somewhere new?”

“Not so long as I keep my grip on facts:

Plain Mary Smith

I 'm safe when I can say, 'I 'm getting crazy again.' The saying restores my sanity. Having no one to say it to, I run amuck."

"You have that friend," said Perez. He stopped a minute. "I would not have you hold yourself, if that would do you harm, Arthur; but now I say, take yourself in the hand strong, for of my life the bitterest time was when you raised your arm at me."

Saxton's face jerked and then grew still. "Come, boys!" he said, rolling a handful of cigars on the table. "Smoke."

I never saw any one who could get himself and friends in and out of trouble like Saxton. In five minutes we were laughing and talking as though nothing unusual had occurred. That 's what I call strength of mind. It was n't that Sax could n't feel if he let himself, Heaven knows. It was that he could shut down so tight, when roused to it, that he *would n't* feel, nor you, neither.

At the same time there was a pity for him

Saxton's Story

aching at the bottom of my heart, and when Perez and I left him to walk home together a remark Perez made started the Great Scheme into operation.

“The girl *must* care for him,” said Perez. “His erratically! Bah! What woman cares for that, so long that the strangeness is in the way of feeling, and not in the way of non-feeling? Women desire that their admirer shall be of some romance. And with that beautiful poet face; the fine manner; the grace of body and of mind—that unusual beautiful which is he and no other—you tell me that any woman shall see that lay at her feet and not be moved? *Tonteria!* I believe it not. When the story of that other woman arrived to Señorita Maria's ear what is it she feel? The religious abhorrence? The violation of taste? Perhaps, but much more a thing she does not know herself, that monster of the green eye, called Jealousy—believe me, Señor Saunders, the man who look sees more of the play. It is so. Mees

Plain Mary Smith

Mary may feel bad in many way, but when she will listen to the explanation not at all, her worst feel bad is jealousy.”

I don't want to lay claim for myself as a great student of mankind, yet ideas to that effect had begun to peek around the corner of my skull. It seemed to me that Mary felt altogether too *hot* sorry and not enough resigned sorry for it to be a case of friendly interest.

“I guess you 're right, Mr. Perez,” said I, “and if we could only get Sax to bust through her ideas, as I busted through his to-day—”

“*Perfectamente!*” cried Perez, slapping me on the back. “It is the same; obsession, Arthur called it. It is that and no other. This Belknap has so played upon her mind that it is not her mind; it is a meixture of some ideas she has, and what he wishes her to be. If she could have an arm of that rude strength like your own—but,” he shrugged his shoulders, “it is a lady, and there is nothing.”

“I 'm not so darned sure about that,” says I,

Saxton's Story

little particles of a plan slowly settling in the mud-puddle I call my mind. "I 'm not so hunky-dory positive. . . . If I could get holt of something against that cussed Belknap,—something that would look bad to a woman,—I'd risk it."

Perez brightened right up. "You have something thought about?" he asked, eager. "Do not go to the hotel to-night. Let me be your host—we are right at the door—*Su casa*, Señor—let me offer my little entertainment, and we shall to talk further—will you not let it be so?"

I liked Perez and I wanted to talk as much as he did. "Much obliged," says I; "I hate a hotel, anyhow." So in we went.

XII

BILL MEETS A RELATIVE

PEREZ had a fine house, a revelation to me; big halls, big rooms, the walls covered with pictures, Injun relics, armor, swords, guns, and what not; many servants to fetch and carry, and an ease and comfort over it for which delicious is the only word.

We had a bully little dinner out in the cool garden, which I got through all right by playing second to Perez. The finger-bowls had me off the trail a little, but I waited and discovered their purpose. You can find out everything if you wait long enough.

Then with coffee and cigars we began to talk.

“Now for the plan of Señor Saunders,” says

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Perez, opening the bottom of his well-supported vest. He looked so respectable and ordinary sitting there, that my plan lost its light. I forgot the other side of him.

“Well,” I begun, lamely, “Saxton wants to marry Mary.”

Perez politely acknowledged that such was the fact.

“Then,” says I, “why don’t he just do it?”

Perez looked his disappointment.

“That would be well, surely,” says he in the tone one uses to a harmless fool.

“Here,” says I. “First, I want to break into Mr. Belknap. You say he ’s got some kind of political game on?”

Perez renewed his interest. “*Si*,” says he. “This is what he makes. He is now going to and fro, putting those that have come to his church against those of the old religion. Against the Catholic Church he lays the blame of everything wrong. It will be a revolution, he says, to annihilate that enemy of man, the old church,

Plain Mary Smith

and in its place put that wonder of virtue, the church of Mr. Belknap. What *will* happen is that many poor men shall be killed, and the wolf-rascals get fat, as usual. With Belknap are the few in earnest, who think; the many who neither care nor think, but are led; those that fight for love of it; those who are hypocrites, and those who look for profit. On our side, the same. There is no advantage to either by comparison in that. In here comes the difference. Such men as Oriñez and myself know that this unhappy land must have peace, before any notion of right can grow. When it is all fight, fight, fight, one cannot think evenly—has your brother been killed? Your wife and sisters murdered? And then you will think calmly of the issue? Time is needed to heal these old wounds, that more can work together. So Oriñez and I fight for time—I with my money and my counsel, he with the terror of his name. Once I did Oriñez a favor; he never forgets. So when I called

Bill Meets a Relative

to help me in this, the tiger sheathed his claws; the man of blood turned shepherd; the robber, honest; but,"—and here Perez's voice took a bitterness worse than curses,—“but Mr. Belknap, that respected man of God, will have it that the need of the State is the drawing of blood—once more, fire, slaughter, rape, till the land stinks with corpses, lays black in the sunlight and rings with the cries of injured women—a great work. . . .”

Perez stood up, gripping the table. “I am a little, peaceful man,” he said, “but there are times when I could drive a knife through that man and shout with joy for every blow.” He sat down quickly and smiled a faint smile. “*My* obsession,” said he, wiping his forehead; “I, too, preach peace through the letting of blood. Belknap may be as much in earnest as myself—Bah! This foolish pretense of candor! He is *not*; he is a scoundrel—whether he knows it or not, a scoundrel.”

“Well, that 's good news,” said I. “It won't

Plain Mary Smith

be hard for me to pick a quarrel with him, which is precisely what I intend to do. I 'll meet his schemes with some of my own. Mary likes me, and it will be at least a stand-off in her mind if Brother Belknap and I fall out. Then the next thing is for Arthur to get a party of men, capture Mary, take her off and marry her."

Perez threw up his hands in horror. "Señor Saunders!" he cried; "for you to say this! I am astonished! Abstract the lady without her wish? Surely I have not heard you rightly—*chanzas aparte*, you play with me—you wish to see me look?"

"Not I," says I, stout; "I mean every word of it. As Sax said this afternoon, there 's times when it 's wicked to twiddle with courtesy. That girl will ruin her whole life if Belknap has the making of it. Her friends ought n't to stand by and see it done—damn it, man! Suppose she dropped her handkerchief as she was falling over a cliff—what

Bill Meets a Relative

would you do first: save her life or pick up the handkerchief?"

Perez puffed and thought a moment. "*Tiene V. razon,*" he says, "there is more here than a ball-room. I knew her as a girl, I know her now. Belknap I know too. My life I stake on it that for Belknap to win her, means her life wrecked, and yet I stop—from habit. I stake my life—I mean it—on my judgment, yet dare not stake an action to make that judgment good."

He waited again, while the minutes slipped by; drumming on the table; shifting things in his mind. The whole air of long, long use to the handsome, nice things I saw about me struck me strong in the man. He was born to it, and his forebears centuries before him. Yet instead of breeding out the man in him, it had only taken off the scum.

At last he spoke. "Give me more time, *compañero*. I shall consider this further. To meddle with other lives is always a dan-

Plain Mary Smith

gerous business, just as not to meddle may be a shameful one. As it stands, if he gets not the lady for a wife, Saxton is a lost man—I know him. On his word, on your word and on my word, she is not indifferent to him. We know Belknap is a rascal, and for her unfit. And so, action—yet I am a man of peace.”

He smiled at me. “Did you ever see a man of peace in more unpeaceful place? Well, Señor Saunders, your plan has that daring which often crows success. It remains to be seen whether Arthur can by any means be brought to think of it: his pride will be afire at the thought—yes, that is it. Listen. If you can gain his acceptance—and you have no plan without it—I am with you, heart and soul.”

“Good!” says I. “Shake hands on it. I sha’n’t strike Arthur at once. I mean to work up the disagreement with Brother Belknap first. ’T will do no harm in any case if his head is punched.”

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Perez laughed. "You are warrior, pure and not so simple," says he. "Heaven send strength to your arm when you meet."

"I ask no odds of top, bottom, nor middle," says I. "Give me a fair field."

"There spoke a better spirit than Achilles of old times," says Perez. "So should I be, if I had an arm like that."

"I 'll bet there 'd be some danger in you, my friend!" says I.

The light went out of his face. "Mention it not," he said sternly. "Once it was my misfortune to kill a man—you are not offended at my speech?"

"Not on your family portraits!—but, of course, I could n't know—you ain't put out, for your part?"

"Only what is right I should be—what is it your great poet says—'bears yet a precious jewel in its head'? So with me. To walk with a ghost has done me no harm. In pity for myself, I pity others. But this is a melancholy

Plain Mary Smith

talk—come, I shall show you my pictures. Some are wonderful, all are good.’’

So we went into the fine old house again and saw the paintings. They were beyond my calculations. Outside of the things Sax never finished and bar a chromo or two, I ’d never seen a picture—I don’t count the grandfathers’ portraits at home—decent people enough, them and their wives, but not what you ’d call beautiful except Great-Grandmother De La Tour—she was a corker.

Seeing that I enjoyed ’em, Perez explained the pictures to me, what were the good points. When I ’ve told people the names on the pictures in Perez’s gallery, I ’ve simply been told I lied.

Next Perez said, “You like music, Señor Saunders?”

“You bet!” says I. So he led the way into a room off the gallery. It was a long, high room rounded at one end, with an arched ceiling. The least whisper in there rang clear. At

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the round end was an organ. Perez called; a little Injun boy came to pump the organ.

Perez seated himself on the bench. "Now," said he, "if only we had Arthur—foolish fellow! Here is this great house with only one small man in it! I beg him to live here, but he will not—he says he must live in a place rough, as you saw."

"I 'm inclined to think Sax knows his pasture, Mr. Perez," I answered.

He nodded. "I only spoke as I often do," he said, "of what I wish, instead of what must be—so little a change would make this so much better a world." He thought for a second. "An easier world," he corrected; "really it is better as it is—well, I am more musician than philosopher,—what will you, *amigo mio*? Something grand? military? of sentiment, or peace?"

"I tell you, Mr. Perez," says I, "I don't know anything about music. Can't you play pieces not too high for me, yet good to

Plain Mary Smith

listen to, so I feel it, and learn at the same time?"

He laughed as if I tickled him. "There speaks that so practical Northern head," says he, "that will have the heart lifted and also a dollar in the pocket."

"Am I foolish?" I asked. I never yet played being big before a man who knew something. When he *knows* he sees your little play and despises you for it.

"Not foolish, *chico*," says Perez. "Only wise with a wisdom strange to me." He wheeled and looked at me. "A most strange young man you are; the strength of a giant, roaring health and no fool, and yet you will listen to an older man—you *wish* to listen. Receive the thanks of an older man. The hope of such service is the one poor vanity remaining to him. May time so deal with you that you shall never know the compliment you pay—listen!"

The old organ burst into a pride of sound.

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big and splendid—steel and fair ladies—roses and sudden death. Made my heart get big and want to do something. Perhaps talking with Perez, his air of decent sadness, and his old-fashioned way of speaking, kind of lofty for this time, yet never slopping over; and perhaps the beautiful old house with its hangings, pictures, and armor helped the music, but anyhow, as I listened, I had visions. I felt like a lost calf that's got back to the herd and a sight of mama. I was still in my dream when I realized the music had stopped and that Perez was looking at me.

“May I take a liberty?” said he. “A resemblance has perplexed me since I met you.”

“Sure,” says I, waking up.

He walked to the corner where there stood an old suit of armor. It was made for a sizeable man. Together we put the corselet on me, and then I fixed the helmet and followed Perez's lead.

He held a lamp before us, as we went down

Plain Mary Smith

a passage into a small side room. There I thought I saw my image in a glass. Perez laughed at my face, when I found it was a picture. It seemed magic to me.

“What in the world!” says I.

“Behold the Marquis De La Tour!” says he.

“The devil it is!” says I. “Still respected, though forty greats removed! Perez, old man, that ’s my grandpa!”

“The face proves it,” he answered. “He is also mine. Cousin, I felt the pull of blood this day. Your hand, and we shall have a bottle of wine.”

“It ain’t often that a man meets his forty-ply great-grandpa and so nice a Spanish cousin,” says I. “I reckon I can square it with Mary later. Lead on, McDuff, and dammed be he who cannot hold enough.”

A very tidy little tidal wave of joy broke over the Perez mansion. Everybody rejoiced; we had the man-servant and the maid-servant and the rest of the menagerie in drinking

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healths to the new-met relatives. To this day I ain't exactly sure how close connected Perez and I are. Grandpa De La Tour was a little nearer than Adam, to be sure, but not near enough, so there would n't have been some fussing about his will, if it should suddenly be discovered.

One of his daughters married a Spaniard that started the Perez line,—and My! but that line was spread out thin! There 'd been pretty husky families on my side, too; however, I was durned proud to claim kin with a man like Perez, and I would n't have spoiled the lonesome little man's joy in finding a relative, anyhow. All his tribe but him had been wiped out completely. I was the only relative he had—that is, that he knew about. The United States was full of 'em, if he 'd only known it. Europe, too, I reckon. Still, his talk about the pull of blood was n't nonsense, neither. I felt drawn to him from the first, and who can say that in feeling and ways of acting we really

Plain Mary Smith

were n't closer connected than some brothers are? And Grandpa De La Tour was all right for an excuse. I sure did look like him—not so much now, that I wear hair on my face, but then I would n't have known which was him and which was me if we met on the street.

Before we turned in for the night I spoke to Perez again about Sax and Mary. He listened eager enough now. What I suggested was all right—little peculiarities of a gentleman. As Perez put it, “The greater courtesy of the heart, that stops not at the puny fences of the fixed way.” How different the same thing looks in different lights! He was dead right about the fences. I never saw a fence yet without wanting to tear a hole in it, but you 've only to string a thread across, if I 've no business there, to keep me out.

It appeared to me then, and it appears to me still, that I had a right to interfere in Mary's affair. At times, of course, you 're a plain meddlesome Pete, if you cut in, and you de-

Bill Meets a Relative

serve all you probably will get,—as many kicks as the parties can land on you before you escape; on the other hand, Perez was right when he said it sometimes was shameful not to interfere. And while marriage is the most private of all things, it 's the most binding, too: you can lose money, get experience, and make more; fall out with your friends and make it up again, but a lifetime tied to one person is the stiffest proposition a human being is called upon to face. Here 's Mary, a girl without much experience, putting herself in the way of being hooked for life to a man I knew to be a fraud—let her suffer for her folly? No, by the Lord! Let me suffer for my folly, if necessary, but in it I go. We 're all kids and sometimes we 've got to be made to do the right thing—and—here 's the rub—if strict but kind papa is sure he 's right (which he can't be) its easy; if not, I suppose it 's up to us as per general orders, do the best you can and prepare to go down with the wreck. I envy the man

Plain Mary Smith

who 's sure he 's right, but the Lord have mercy on his friends. Well, that 's what Perez and I arrived at; that we were stacked against a blooming mystery and we 'd shoot at the one glimmer of light we had. Mary *did* care for Sax. Good. Belknap was a fraud. Good. To the devil with the rest of the argument.

However, I did n't reveal my full plan regarding Belknap to my kinsman. I had a hunch that even my likeness to Grandpa De La Tour would n't convince him. You see, like most kids, savages, and people not grown up in general, I believed in playing the game as it was played on me. I would n't let a rogue escape for want of a helpful lie in season, acted or spoken. I could n't see why you should n't get him his way, so long as you got him. It took me some years to understand Saxton's saying, that it was better for a rascal to escape, than for an honest man to turn rascal in catching him. Plain enough when you think of it. If you work low down on the other feller, to

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trip him, there 's two rascals, that 's all. It comes medium hard to see it in that light, though, when before your eyes the rascal is having it all his own way. And, while I disapprove of my own methods, the results was great. No use talking, the wicked sometimes prosper and your Uncle William played in a full-jeweled streak of luck. The next day I opened my campaign.

XIII

RED MAKES A FEW REMARKS

IT seemed to me it was only friendly for me to get some sympathy for Saxton, as he would n't try for himself. Yet this looked a delicate proposition. I can't give you the proper idea of how quick-witted Mary was, how easy she saw the behind-meaning of your words, or even saw things you did n't know yourself.

It 's a good trait to its possessor, but, like everything else in this world, there 's a price to pay for it. She sometimes saw things that were n't there. A man with extra good sight is more fooled by mirage than a man who does n't trust his eyes so much. And it had fallen down on her, on the most important

Red Makes a Few Remarks

dealing of her life. She saw Saxton wrong, and could n't see him right, for that trust in her own judgment. She had to root up the very foundation of her belief in everything to upset her wrong judgment of him. She felt the drawing toward him was something to be fought hard, the same as a man would fight a growing inclination to drink. And like a great many people (although it 's a thing I can't understand myself), she swung to what was solemn, uninteresting, and hard, for safety.

And changed! Well, that morning, when I slid around to the house of the fountain, I scarcely knew her. It was Saturday, and no school. About a dozen or twenty young Pan-amans walked or sat about the yard. The Reconstructed looked stiff and unhappy in the boiled white shirt of progress, but out of native good nature tried to appear pleasant.

Lots of the Great Works, that spread misery over whole communities, would n't come off, if a sense of a joke was left in the conspirators.

Plain Mary Smith

Mary was keen for a laugh, and saw the funny side of things as quick as any man, yet those poor little devils all out of place and condition did n't raise a smile on her face. It did on mine, though. I thought of 'em, happy in their fleas, sun, and dirt, and then looked at the early-Christian-martyr expression on their faces and choked, but that laugh rode on sorrow and anger at that. It was a downright wickedness to the children. I looked at Mary, knowing her for a kind woman—one who loved all innocent play. I hit myself on the head at the dumb-foolishness of it. How in the devil's name could she bring herself to approve of this? Why is it we lay a course for somebody else we 'd never think of following ourselves? Well, I sat there and echo continued to answer "Why?" as usual, till the silence thickened.

She broke it with a lucky proposition. "You seem very serious this morning, Will," she said.

Red Makes a Few Remarks

I told her that was so; looking at the poor little revolutionists in their white shirts of suffering, I made up my mind to let her have it.

“I wonder,” I said, “if it ’s asking too much of you to listen to me for awhile. I had a miserable time of it, as a boy, and now and then it sits on me so hard I like to speak to a friend for comfort.”

It was the surest way to claim her time. She caught my hand. “Certainly,” she said. “If you only knew, Will, how anxious I am to be of some real service in this world, instead of being told that I ’m—”

“Let it go!” I put in. “That you ’re good to look at, and so forth?”

She nodded. “I don’t mean that I ’m so lofty-minded that I don’t like it sometimes, yet I must n’t grow to like it and—”

“For my part I ’m glad there ’s some beauty in this little old world,” said I. “I love to trig myself out as you see—give the folks a treat. Honest, I can’t see the harm

Plain Mary Smith

in brightening up the landscape all you 're able. But, though I ain't much of a professional beauty, I can understand that too much sugar leads to seasickness."

"You 're as handsome a young man as a young man should be!" says Mary, indignant. "Don't attempt a foolish modesty. I wish I were strong, and six-foot-three, and a man!"

"Throw in the red hair?"

"You have beautiful hair! I believe you know it, you vain boy, and let it grow purposely. And now you 're just leading me to sound your praises!"

I laughed. "I 'd stick at nothing, for that," I answered. "Oh, why ain't I ten years older! I 'd have you out of here in a minute!"

"I believe you would," she said; "I don't believe you 'd care for my protests nor prayers nor tears. You 'd just selfishly pick me right up and walk away with me and bully me for the rest of my days!"

"Just that—Heavens! But I 'd make it aw-

Red Makes a Few Remarks

ful for you! Captain Jesse would be a lambkin beside me!”

We both laughed, thinking of Jesse the Terrible.

“The dear old *Matilda!*” she said,—almost whispered,—and her eyes grew softer.

“Happy times, were n’t they? And coming after what I ’d left—” I shook my head.

“Tell me, Will.”

“I ’ve wondered how much was my not understanding,” I went on, “and how much I had to kick about. I suppose if I was older, I ’d be like Sax—keep my troubles to myself—but I have n’t learned how, yet. Still, I don’t want to spoil your morning.”

She frowned a little at Saxton’s name, not an ill-tempered, but a thoughtful frown, as a new idea struck her. She put it away from her, and turned.

“That you should come to me, Will, is a high compliment. I know you ’re not the kind to give your woes to the world. If—” she

Plain Mary Smith

smiled at me, "if you won't think it heartless of me, I 'll say I 'll enjoy hearing 'em."

"I understand," I answered; "just as, in a way, I 'll enjoy telling them. Well, here we go."

So I put the facts to her as fair and calm as I could, patterning after Saxton's method. I had n't his nerve; gradually heat swept into my discourse. I forgot where I was and who I was talking to, as the old wrongs boiled up.

When I finished I remembered, and sat back.

Mary was also still.

I rolled a cigarette and played for airiness. "Of course," I said, "it 's all in a lifetime."

She put her hand on mine. "Don't," she said, "don't."

I shut up. The minutes slid by heavy-footed. At last she spoke.

"For sheer inhumanity," she said, "I think that is without an equal."

"Oh, no!" I said. "I reckon the story 's

Red Makes a Few Remarks

common enough wherever people let an idea ride 'em bareback. Father was a good man, with bad notions, that 's all."

I purposely let my eye fall on the little revolutionists, standing in a melancholy line—nothing to do, nothing to think, all balloon-juice to them.

As I hoped, her eyes followed mine. She straightened, seeing the point. Color came into her face. "Children!" she called sharply in Spanish, "why do you not run and play?"

The line fell into embarrassment. They hooked the dirt with their feet and looked at each other.

"Alfonso!" said Mary, "start some game!"

The biggest boy took off his hat and smiled his grave, polite smile.

"*Si, Señorita!*" he replied; "but what is 'game'?"

"I 've been so busy with—more important things that I have n't thought of amusements," Mary explained to me, aside. There was apol-

Plain Mary Smith

ogy in the explanation; I heard with glad ears.

“Is it possible they know no games?”

“Why, I suppose they do, of a kind,” I answered; “but it seems to me the chief lack of these kids is real play; they ’re all little old men and women; the kid spring is knocked out of ’em; they ’ve lived in war and slaughter so much they don’t believe in anything else.”

“Well,” said she promptly, “that ’s a poor state of affairs.”

“The worst,” said I. “What kind of nation can you grow out of children who have no fun? Their God will look like a first cousin of our devil. I *did* manage to rake some sport out of my time, or else I ’d gone to the bad entirely, I reckon.”

The color deepened in her face. She did n’t have to be hit with a club.

“We wanted to furnish them a moral backbone, first,” she apologized again. “It seemed necessary to give them some standards of conduct.”

Red Makes a Few Remarks

“I ’d give ’em a good time, first—they ’re a hint young for standards.”

“Just see them stand there! Why, they seem without an idea—what shall I do with them?” She was all at a loss. “It is n’t right, poor children!” She suddenly turned to me, with eagerness in her face. “Could n’t you stir them up, Will?”

“Sure!” says I, throwing away the cigarette. “Come along! Tag, you ’re it!” and I lit out at a gallop, Mary after me, and the revolutionists watching, altogether too polite to appear astonished. My! but that girl could run! Jump, too; I cleared the fountain, thinking she ’d have to go ’round, but she gathered her skirts in her hand and was over it in a flash of black and white, clean-motivated as a greyhound.

“*Qui dado, compadres!*” I yelled. “Here comes the government army!” Instantly they understood and scattered. By hollering at them, they finally got the idea. Tag would n’t

Plain Mary Smith

have interested them—revolution did. We divided into sides. As soon as they got going good, Mary and I dropped out of it.

“There,” said I, watching ’em running and hollering and giggling, “I like that better.”

“It is better,” agreed Mary, “and my thanks to you for the change. I ’m afraid one forgets the little needs in thinking of the great ones.”

“Mary,” I said, “it may sound strange coming from me; I hope you won’t take it wrong; but do you know that in reading the New Testament plumb through, I can’t remember coming on a place where it says anything about big needs? Please don’t think I ’m talking too careless for decency; Christ always acted like a kind friend, as I see it. I can’t believe it would hurt His feelings a particle to hear me talk this way. He was above worrying about lots of things that bother the churches. He stopped to take a glass of wine and have a talk with a saloon-keeper. Now, if He was God,

Red Makes a Few Remarks

was that a little thing? Does God do little useless things? Remember, I thought these things over when I was getting it hard—stop me, if I seem disrespectful.”

“No,” she said, “it sounds queerly to me, but I know you are not disrespectful, Will. I would n’t accuse you of being the kind of fool who ’d play smart at the expense of the Almighty.”

“All right—glad you understand me. Now, listen! Is it great to pull a long face? Is it right to get melancholy about religion, when the head of it always preached happiness? Is it sensible to try and make every one do your way, when you ’re told the nearer like little children we are, the better we are off? Don’t you think you ’re acting as if you knew better than Christ Himself? You don’t imagine that those kids, as they were ten minutes ago, was what He meant when He said, ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me’? Seems to me you ’ve altered the text to read: ‘Suf-

Plain Mary Smith

fer, little children, to come unto Me.' They sure were suffering in them starched white shirts, but I 'm betting the words were n't meant to read like that."

"Will," she said earnestly, "I think I 've made the common mistake of supposing that I alone cared. Even now, while I feel you have more the real spirit than I, your way of speaking jars on me." She sat down as if she had suddenly grown weak. "I have simply worshiped a certain way of doing things and forgotten the results and the reason for doing anything. Your straight way of putting it makes my life seem ridiculous."

She stopped with a miserable face. I had n't, in the least, thought to convince her. Most people will hang on to a mistake of that kind harder than they will to a life-preserver. It was like turning a Republican into a Democrat by simply showing him he was wrong—who 'd go into politics with that idea?

I stared at her, not believing. "Why,

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Mary," I said, hedging, as a person will in such circumstances, "it ain't a cinch that I 'm right. I 'm only a boy, and of course things appear to me boy fashion."

She cut me short. "To be honest, doubts have troubled me before this. Your history proves what can be done by extreme—"

Up to this she had spoken quite quietly. Now she put her head in her hands and burst out crying; fortunately we were in a little summer-house where no one could see us.

"Oh, Will!" she sobbed out, "the struggle for nothing at all! All fight, fight, and no peace! I want to be a good woman, I *do*; but what is there for me?"

"Listen to me again," says I, so sorry that I had another attack of reason. "There 's this for you—to be a man's wife, and make him twice a man because you are his wife; to raise boys and girls that prove what 's right—there 's a job for you."

She dried her tears and smiled at me,

Plain Mary Smith

ashamed of showing so much feeling. "Is this an offer?" she said.

I had to laugh. "You don't squirm out that way, young lady—you were in earnest and you know it. I 'll take you, if necessary—by the Prophet Moses, I *will*, if some other feller does n't show up soon—but I want to speak of a more suitable man."

She looked at me. It was a try at being stern, but, as a result, it was a good deal more scared.

"You can do a great deal with me, Will," she said, "but I 'll not hear a word of Arthur Saxton."

"Then," says I, stern in dead earnest, "you are a foolish and an unfair woman. You 've believed what was told you; now you *shall* hear a friend."

"I will *not*," she cried, rising.

I caught her arms and forced her back into the seat. "You will," I answered.

"Very well," she said with quivering lips.

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“If you wish to take advantage of the friendship I have shown you, and, because you are strong, make me hear what I have forbidden you to say, I ’m helpless.”

“All the mean things you say sha’n’t stop me. Now, as long as you *must* listen, won’t you pay attention?” I asked this in my most wheedling tone. I knew I ’d fetch her. She stayed stiff for about ten seconds. Then the dimples came.

“It makes me so angry to think I can’t get angry with you, I don’t know what to do,” she snapped at me. “You have no *business* to talk to me this way. I should n’t stand it for a minute. You ’re nothing but a great bully, bullying a poor little woman, you nice boy! Who ever heard of such an argument? Because you *make* me listen, I must pay attention! Well, to show you what a friend I am, I will.”

“Thank you, Mary,” I said, holding out my hand. “Thank you, dear. You ’ll not be the

Plain Mary Smith

worse for hearing the truth. It is n't like you to condemn a man unheard."

"I heard him."

"You heard a lunatic—he told me; why will you call up the worst of him and believe only in that?"

She sprang up, outraged. "I do *not* call up the worst of him! That is a cowardly excuse—he should be man enough to—"

"Wait: I never meant you did it intentionally. Can't you see how anxious he might be to please you? Can't you believe that if he did something he thought would please you greatly, and you called him a rascal for it, that the worst of him would likely come on top?"

"Yes," she answered slowly; "I can see that—I should, I know."

"Of course you would. Now listen. I have a story for you, that your love of kindness and nobility will find pleasure in."

Again I tried Saxton's method—there is n't a better one, if it 's real stuff you have to tell.

Red Makes a Few Remarks

Very quietly I put it to her as he had to me. She had less color when I finished.

“If that is the truth, it *was* noble,” she said, when I finished. The breath fluttered in her throat.

“It *is* the truth. Arthur is n’t too good to lie, by any means, but he has too much pride and courage to lie about a thing like that.”

She nodded her head in assent. I got excited, seeing victory in sight, but had sense enough to keep cool. I knew, even at that early age, there ’s snags sometimes underneath the smoothest water.

She sighed as if the life of her went out.

“Impulse,” she said, “a noble impulse—and then? an ignoble one, followed with the same determination.”

That had too much truth in it. I did n’t approve of his drinking himself to death, because he could n’t have what he wanted.

“Yes,” I answered smoothly, “and what he needs is a strong excuse to make them all good

Plain Mary Smith

—he has the strength to do it, you don't deny that?"

"He has strength to do anything—there is the pity of it. There never lived a man who so had his life in his own hand as Arthur Saxton. Would you have me marry him to reform him? Have I no right to feel proud, on my side?"

"No, to the first," says I, "and yes, to the second. He has waked up at last. I feel sure—if only you could believe in him a little more."

"Oh, Will!" she said, "that is what I fear the most. I don't care if he demands much, for so do I, but to be dependent that way—I cannot trust him, till he trusts himself."

"Yes, Mary," I agreed; "but at the same time, he 's lots more of a man than the average, handicap him with all his faults!"

She answered me with a curious smile. "Mine is an unhappy nature in one way," she said; "half a loaf is worse than no bread to me. I 'd rather never know of Paradise than

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see and lose it.” She threw her hands out suddenly, in a gesture that was little short of agony.

“Oh, I wish sometimes I had no moral sense at all—that I could just live and be happy—and I *can't* be very good if I wish that—that 's a comfort.” She turned to me. “Now, Will, I have opened my heart to you as I could not have done to my own mother; will you believe me if I say I cannot talk about this any more?”

“Sure, sweetheart,” I said, and kissed her. She let her head stay on my shoulder.

“You are a great comfort, brother Will,” she said. The tone made something sting in my eyes. Poor little woman, fighting it out all alone, so unhappy under the smiles, so born to be happy!

I could n't speak to save me. She looked up at my face. “You are a brave and noble gentleman, brother mine,” she said. I think that would have finished me up—I am such a

Plain Mary Smith

darned woman at times, but she changed quick as lightning.

“Let ’s play with the children,” she said. “We ’ve had enough of this.”

I was glad to scamper around. One thing was certain. I ’d hurt Sax none, and proved the value of my plan. Another thing I wanted to know I learned on leaving.

“Mary,” I said, as if it was an understood thing between us, “why did Mr. Belknap speak against Saxton?”

She fell into the trap, unthinking. “Because he wished to warn me, of course. And in spite of all you say, Will—forgive me—he is a man of such insight, I cannot believe him altogether wrong.”

“It would be bad if Belknap did n’t turn out the man you think him, would n’t it?” I asked, innocently.

“It would,” she said. And with that I came away.

XIV

BROTHER BELKNAP'S REVOLUTION

THE next thing needed in my calculations was time. My three-day vacation ended Monday; I had to have an extension or a sure thing on another, shortly. I was ready to throw up my job, but I felt it would n't come to that, likely, so I pulled for home and Jim.

At the store Pedro told me Jim had been there yesterday afternoon, but left at once in no pleasant frame of mind. Pedro did n't know where he had gone. Took out toward the east, riding fast.

I did n't know what to do. If I went after him, it was likely I 'd miss him; if I waited, he might n't be around again for days.

“What ailed him, Pede?” I asked.

Plain Mary Smith

“That is that which I am not to know,” says Pedro. “He cuss and swear mos’ fiercely. He also es-strike one stranger *hombre* who has been here making conversation with the workers. *Si*, he strike heem verree strong, so that the stranger does not know anything for one hour. He also say he will to shoot that stranger if he put the foot on thees groun’ again. The men that are there make protestation and Señor Holton say, ‘You are fools.’ And Pepe, the large one, say, ‘I am not a fool,’ and Señor Holton say, ‘No—you are a jackass,’ and Pepe say, ‘You have abused us much.’ I am astonish to hear that, for of all men I have seen none is so kind to the people as Señor Holton; and I am moved to say, ‘Pepe, you lie!’ He thereupon strike me at the nose, as you see. I say, ‘Pepe, you may strike my nose, but that does not make you not a liar—a liar is what you are.’ And Señor Holton say, ‘Mind them not, Pedro, you are an honest man; but now I shall to abuse them for the fair

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if I do hear one cheep,' and he draw out his peestol and say, 'Yap, you coyotes! Let me hear you!' and there is such silence that one may hear his heart. Then Señor Holton say to me, 'Pedro, this is bad business. Mind the store the best you can—I must ride. If they come at you h'run away—I do not care for these goods, and you have spoken up like a man.' ” Pedro smote himself upon the lung with his clenched fist. “H'run I shall not,” says he. “Thees store can only be obtain by making the es-step over my corpsey.”

“Corpsey” sounded kind of frivolous for the occasion. However, underneath all the rolling eye and fine large gestures, the sand of the little man lay strong. I did n't understand the racket at all, but I knew it meant business or Jim would never have taken such a stand.

“Why did n't you tell me this first, Pedro?” I asked. “I might have gone away and left you alone.”

“That was what I try to weesh,” said he.

Plain Mary Smith

“For you are young, and there is life before you. These are b-a-a-d fallows, these; if they keel Pedro, eet ees no harm, but you have been kin’ to me, and I do not weesh you hurt. So I say, I shall let him go; they mus’ not harm Beel; and then I feel so verree lonesome, and I think, He shall know and for himself decide.”

“Why, you darned old Guinea!” I yelled at him, “d’ you suppose I ’d leave you to buck this through alone? I don’t know what got into Jim not to put some men in with you.”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders. “Señor Holton had no time—what it ees, ees emperative—and for those men, they are all mad, I think. They come and es-swear at me, who never have done them injury—I, never! Who can say Pedro harmed him? They only leave when you are to arrive.”

I don’t know why, but suddenly it came upon me that we were stacked against a crowd of men—I mean it came right *real* to me, and I sat down in a chair, limp. I never admired

Brother Belknap's Revolution

a man more than I did Pedro, at that moment. There he was, the little man I so often laughed at, quietly going about his business, waiting for a crowd to come and kill him! I did n't mind one or two, or perhaps a few more men, so much, but the crowd threw a crimp into me. When you learn how much bigger a coward a crowd is, than any one man in it, you are not so troubled, but then! Well, it was the first time I 'd been right down terrified in my life, and it was awful. I raked the sweat off my forehead, steadied myself the best I could, and says:

“Well, Pede, we 're in for it!”

“*Tiene V. razon!*” says he; “but we will to do what we can. If I live, always shall I remember how Beel stay with me.”

I 've heard it said that a good example will steady you when you 're scart. Out of my personal experience I beg to differ. I got mad at Pedro for not being frightened; and the more I thought how well he behaved, the worse

Plain Mary Smith

rattled I got. I sat there, in a hot chill every time I heard a noise outdoors, till at last some sense came back to me. "This won't do!" says I. "Here, Pede, where 's the hot-water bottle?"

He handed me a bottle of brandy. I put the neck to my neck and warmed my poor soul. Lord! but it tasted good. Dutch courage ain't on the same shelf with real courage, but it 's a durned sight better than scart-to-death in a rumpus.

I had n't more than time to give a "hoo" of satisfaction and put the bottle down, when there came a running and a yelling down the road. Pede and I jumped for the door together. The valley lay flat between the hills, north of us, and you could see a mile to the turn in the road. Down the road two men were running for their lives, a screeching gang after them, peppering 'em with rocks, clubs, and what not. Also there was the shine of knives—the shine that always sickens me. I

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waited for a gun-shot, but none came. The two had fifty yards' start, and they were n't losing it, if they could help it. As they drew nearer I could hear remarks about Papists from the crowd. In a second I saw the play—Brother Belknap's revolution!

That braced me. The victims ran with their arms over their heads for protection; when one dropped his arms and raised his head to cry for help, I recognized Tony Gonzales, the squarest, nicest man in the place. That steadied me more yet. Fifty men to the two!

“Come on, Pedro!” I hollered. We each grabbed a pick-handle, and with that in one hand and a gun in the other, we went to the door.

“Beel,” says Pedro, “let us to remain here. They cannot be hurt now, for they run verree fas'. The es-store is a fort. If we stay, we do better.”

I took in the situation. Tony and his mate were keeping distance nobly. I suppose they

Plain Mary Smith

drew a clip or two from a stone, but they were in no deadly danger unless the crowd got hold of them. Pedro was n't much of a hand to sell groceries and truck, but he was a durned good general when it came to war.

“Queeck, Beel!” says he. “For to defend us make closed the windows and doors, but the one!”

We worked sharp, rolling barrels against the doors and slapping boxes of canned goods against the window-shutters. The work did me a power of good. Anger had driven out most of my fear, yet getting my muscles into use was needed to remove the rest of the poison from my system.

Next I broke open a box of cartridges and spread them on the counter, while Pedro loaded revolvers taken from the stock. By the time the feet drew near, we were in fighting trim. Another cry for help sounded almost at the door. Pede and I rushed out.

“Get in, boys,” I said, “and grab a gun!”

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They ducked under my arm and entered the store.

The rest drew up in a huddle, a ways off, and stopped.

“Now, gentlemen,” I said in the best Spanish I could muster, “what 's the matter?”

I got no answer, but bad looks. They talked and muttered among themselves, and shifted about, with ugly motions—as black and treacherous a mob as a man would like to dream of.

My temperature went right up. I naturally despise not getting an answer to a question. One lad shook his fist and growled something.

That was all. I waited. “Once more,” says I, “what 's the matter?” Same performance. I shot a hole through the hat of the lad who shook his fist. “Third and last call,” says I, “what 's the matter?” but they broke and ran.

My play held 'em for a minute. Our best show was to take the top hand at once, so I walked down to them.

Plain Mary Smith

“Now I want to know what ails you people,” I said, getting the meaning into Spanish, if the words were a little mixed, “and I want to know quick, or there ’ll be a fuss right here.”

A big feller jeered at me: “Put down the gun, and *I* ’ll show you what ’s the matter,” he said.

“You will?” says I, parting with what sense I had. “You yellow-bellied snake-in-the-grass! *You* will show a white man, will you? Come on out here, you that ’s so brave in a crowd!”

I chucked the gun away and waited for him. I got just what I might have expected—they all come for me! Cursing my fool soul, I jumped for the gun. I almost had my hand on it when a rock took me behind the ear and laid me on the grass. It was up to Mr. William De La Tour Saunders to put his feet under him with celerity and hike out of that. It was painful—sufferin’ Moses! How I hated to run from that crowd! I snorted, but run was the

Brother Belknap's Revolution

word, and run I did, with them hollering and laughing at me. Inside, I grabbed two of the guns from the counter, called to Pedro and the other two, and started back. I met the gang right at the door. It was curious how making me run had braved them; they were for tearing everything apart now. Well, our meeting was a surprise to both parties. I 've had to be grateful all my life that my hands think faster than my head. I put four shots into that crowd before I thought at all. The man who picked up my revolver fired and missed me from a three-foot range. I got some of the powder, also a knife in the shoulder, but four men laid out discouraged 'em and they broke again. I put it to them with both hands, Pedro and the other boys cutting in before they found shelter.

By this time I was wild—wanted to go after them and hunt 'em out. Pedro and the other two fastened on me and dragged me in.

“More shall come, Beel!” cried Pedro.

Plain Mary Smith

“We must have care—do not to go, I implore!”

He not only implored, but half-strangled me; they hauled me back and shut the door.

“Listen, all,” says Pedro. “This is not the end. Others will come with guns, and then!—But now to see what is outside.” He stationed us each where we could peek through cracks, and so cover the store from all sides. There was barrels of amunition, General Pedro issued commands to blaze away at a sight.

The folks outside kept up a stream of cursing and abuse, jeers and threats, and we returned a revolver fire just as effective. It was too far for a short gun.

We had two rifles in the shop. I was n't then, and never have been, as good a shot with a rifle as with a pistol. Gonzales, though, had been a hunter. He took the rifle with a pleased smile.

“You make *me* run,” says he, playfully, to outdoors. “Now I make *you* jump! It is thus

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we amuse ourselves." A man showed his head, to the sound of an instant crash from the rifle. He jumped, all right.

"The old church shall say mass for your soul, Juan," says Gonzales. "You are the best dead man in the country."

After that, they were careful. I thought they 'd leave, seeing they could n't do anything with us, till Pedro explained they were probably holding us till armed men came. I should have felt dismal once more at this news, if I 'd had nothing to do. The darkened store wore on my feelings. One feller I shot wriggled in a funny fashion as he lay on the ground. He was still wriggling—I could see him every time I stopped to think. He gave a long twist, like a snake, bringing his face to the light, at the last. He looked as if he felt perfectly disgusted. He had n't ought to have looked that way. It bothered me.

The other three stood the gaff of waiting much better than I. In fact, I was frantic in-

Plain Mary Smith

side me, though I made a good chest of it. "Pede," I says, "let me have the other rifle—I 'm going scouting."

"That is well," says Gonzales. "If you can get up on the hill without being seen, you can drive them out, and we shall have a shot."

So I took the rifle and squirmed through the brush and rocks back of the store until I was a hundred yards or so up the hill. It was a steep slant. In going so far I 'd risen nearly a hundred feet. I could see part of our besiegers plain. Some ten of 'em lay behind boulders, smoking cigarettes and taking it easy. Another batch sat under the bridge. The rest I could n't see.

I had a particular grudge against the feller who challenged me to fight. I searched carefully, and finally made him out, under a rock about three hundred yards away, sitting with his back to me, and playing a game with the man in front of him.

His fat back made a corking target. I rested

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the gun between two stones and had him dead to rights. I was ready to listen to the report and see him fall over, when, by the gods of war! my finger would n't pull the trigger. I had n't the least feeling about killing that treacherous skunk, so far as I knew, but all the same, I could *not* pull that trigger. I was surprised, plenty. "Why, you damn fool!" I says to myself, "what 's eating you? That lad would 'a' slaughtered your entire family, by this time!"

True, too, but it did n't make the gun go off. It 's mighty queer how an unexpected "me" will jump out of you at times. There was one Bill Saunders just as anxious to do that black-guard as a man could be, and there was another—and the boss, too—who would n't stand for it.

I cussed between my teeth. "If you 'd look at me, instead of turning your back, you dog!" I whispered, "I 'd heap you up quick." I broke out into a sweat of shame, knowing how

Plain Mary Smith

my friends were putting their faith in my gathering a man or two. I could have cried with mortification. Suddenly my lad jumped up and pointed, forgetting where he was. The next second the finger jammed into the ground, and the whang of Gonzales's rifle cut through the valley.

I looked where he pointed. Here come a string of men with guns, dog-trotting. I up and pasted into them. The shot started those below. Some jumped up. I could have whaled it to them all right now, but a shell jammed. Our boys socked it to them from the store, while I clawed at the durned cartridge. Got it out with my knife at last and banged away, first below and then at the approaching soldiers. I dropped a man and the soldiers scattered behind rocks and trees.

There was no use staying longer. I had only three cartridges left; nothing much I could do anyhow, as they would sneak up from this on; besides, I stood to get cut off from the store,

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so I carefully picked my way back, not wanting them to learn there was no one on the hill. In such a case as ours, you fight for time. I hoped nothing from time, but every minute you lived was clear gain. Out here in the country prisoners of war were stood against a wall.

So long as they thought we had men on the hill, they 'd be cautious. Likely they 'd send men around to clear the hill, first, and that would give us some minutes.

The other boys had seen the arrival of the soldiers. They were quiet, but hopeless. Gonzales shrugged his shoulders and examined his rifle. "How many?" he asked.

"Soldiers and all, or just soldiers?"

"All."

"Nigh a hundred."

"*Ay de mi! Adios el mundo!* Four men against a hundred! Well, they shall speak of us after—not a hundred will they be, when we leave."

The feeling that you 'll leave a good name

Plain Mary Smith

behind to comfort your last minutes, is a mighty good thing. Wish I had it. It did n't matter a darn to me. All I could think of was that they should n't get me—not if they was a million—and I proposed to work on those lines with force.

“Perhaps they won't jump us,” I said with more wish than hope. “If they try any other play, we can hold 'em a week.”

I had some contempt for those soldiers. I parted with it later. You see, they were bare-foot, ragged, and dirty. Not a thing marked 'em for soldiers, but the guns and the orders. I had n't seen many soldiers, but what I had seen was gay with uniforms and a brass band. Now, if they 'd come at our store with a brass band, it would have been something like. This was only a rucus, with us holding the working end of the mule. No glory, no uniforms, no band, no nothing, but just getting holes shot in you, and it would n't be no more than truthful for me to admit I was perfectly contented with my hide as she was.

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We strengthened the doors and windows by piling more boxes up, leaving only holes to shoot through. Then we waited. The dark heat in the store just melted you; outside the sun hammered fit to knock your eye out. When it comes hot and still—deadly still—I can remember that hour's waiting in the store. I could n't hold on to what I was thinking of for a minute; all my ideas flipped around like scart birds, and I sweat and sweat, and I was sick at my stomach, and the man I shot kept squirming. It was the same as sitting up in bed to find out your nightmare is real. To the devil with waiting! I tried to clamp my attention on mother, on Mary, on everybody I knew. Useless. I did n't seem to know anybody—they were only jokes, and mostly, the faces, as they skipped by, turned on me and grinned. At the same time I kept talking with the other boys and even laughed once in a while. I know they thought I was cool as a watermelon. I 'm even with them there; I thought *they* were, too.

Plain Mary Smith

When Gonzales called, with a click in his voice, "Hist! *Quid'ow!* They come!" I could have raised both hands to heaven in thanks. There 's nothing one-eighth as bad in getting killed as sitting around waiting for it.

I jumped for my window. There ain't a bit of what was in front of me but what 's with me to stay. I could only see a small space that day—anything that was n't in a ten-foot circle was dark. I leave the why to the doctors. It never troubled me again.

I had the south window, kind of slantwise facing the road, and about twenty foot from it, where it passed the store. There was a breastwork of canned goods shoulder high, with lots of loose cartridges spread on the inner top box. The box near me was open, and red labels on quart cans of tomatoes shone out—"Pride of the Garden." I wonder if the man that raised 'em, or he that canned 'em,

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ever imagined they were going to become the bulwarks of the State of Panama?

The shutters were heavy, with holes in 'em about four inches wide, which you could cover with a round piece of wood that swung on a screw. These holes were right in height for me to shoot through. The other boys had to stand on boxes, being shorter.

I took a peep through my gun-hole. There come the rebels, flap-flapping down the road in their bare feet, trailing their guns, their wide-brimmed hats shaking comical. And I felt happy when I saw it. These were real men, and for the last hour I 'd been fighting ghosts. We did n't want 'em to hit us in a body, so I called cheerful to the other boys, "Bet you a can of tomatoes I draw first blood!" and let her flicker through the loop-hole.

XV

TOMATOES BY THE QUART

THE barefoot soldiers expected to walk right through us. They come straight and fairly bunched, while we dropped them. They kept coming and we kept dropping them. Streaks of white flew out of the shutters and whiskers grew on the walls, but not a man of us was touched, while we laid them out something awful.

It was n't we was crack shots, neither, excepting Gonzales. We were, for all practical purposes, cool.

Speaking for myself, I felt neither hope nor fear. I had but one ambition—to make the party that arrived as small as possible. It would surprise me to learn that our boys missed two shots out of five. And there is n't

Tomatoes by the Quart

any crowd, white, brown, nor black, that can stand a gaffing like that.

They had no plan. As I say, they thought all they had to do was walk up and take us. When we put every third man on the grass, they halted, bunching closer, and we pumped it to 'em for keeps. They melted down the road, panic-struck.

We had no cheers of victory, being much too busy. By just keeping industriously at work instead of hollering we put three or four more out of the game. It was business, for us.

The smoke drifted slowly up the hillside; some of the wounded men began hollerin' for water; one got to his knees and emptied his gun at us. Gonzales was for removing him, but I held his hand. "Let him ease his mind," I said, "he can't hit anything." And just to make me out a liar, the beggar covered me with splinters from the shutter. Gonzales shot, and that was over. I began to wish they 'd hustle us again.

Plain Mary Smith

The sweat poured off us. We panted like running dogs. Outside there, where the valley rippled with sun-heat, all was still, except that cry—"Water! water! For the love of God, water!" I 've needed water since. I know what that screech means. Lord! that hour!—a blaze of sun, blue shadows, wisps of smoke curling up the hill, and the lonesome cry in the big silence—"Water! water! For the love of God, water!" That 's what it come to; them fellers did n't care much for victory—they wanted water.

It wore on me, like the barking of a dog. I grabbed the water-pail and started for the door.

"Here!" cries Pedro, "what will you make?"

"I want to stop that noise."

"Put down the pail!" says Pedro. "Foolish fellow! Do you not know they keel you at once?"

"Pede," I says, "I can't sit here and hear

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'em holler like that—there 's no damn use in talking.’’

“Listen,” says Pedro, grabbing me by the coat. “See what you do; here are friends; for them you care not. Eef you are keeled, so much the worse are we—are we not more than they? You leave us, and you shall be keeled and our hope goes—I ask you, is that good?’’

“No,” I says, putting down the pail. “It ain’t, Pede. You ’re right,” and one of ’em outside struck a new note that stuck in me and quivered. “Remember,” I says, “that I died admitting you were right.” Darn it, I was risking my own hide. But Pede had the truth of it. I ought n’t to have done it. So I grabbed the pail and went out.

I was considerable shot at, but not by the wounded men.

The first lad was a shock-headed half-Injun, with a face to scare a mule. He was blue-black from loss of blood. “Drink, pretty creature,

Plain Mary Smith

drink," says I. He grabbed the pail and proceeded to surround the contents. "Whoa, there!" says I, "there are others!" I had to yank the pail away from him. He looked at me with his fevered eyes, and held out his big, gray, quivering hands—"For the love of God, Señor, *poquito—poquito!*"

"No more for you," I said, and he slumped back, his jaw shaking. It was a waste of water, really; he 'd been bored plumb center. So I went the rounds, having to fight 'em away as if they was wolves. Lord! how they wanted that water!

When I got to next to the last man, some better marksmen up the road shot my hat off. That riled me. It would make anybody mad. I stopped on the spot and expressed my sentiments.

"You 're a nice lot of rosy-cheeked gentlemen, you are," says I. "You damned greasy, smelly, flat-footed mix of bad Injun and bad white! If I could get hands on one of you,

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I 'd shred him so fine he 'd float on the breeze. Now, you sons of calamity, you shoot at me once more, and I 'll call on you!"

I was ready to go right up. I waited a minute, but no more shots came.

"All right," says I. "*Sin vergüenza!*" and more I won't repeat. The Spaniard has nice ideas about a good many things, but he cusses by the hog-pen. So I told 'em what I could remember that was disrespectful, fed the last man his water, and returned. I stopped to look at my first man. He 'd passed on. Well, I was n't sorry he 'd had a drink.

"Ha-ha, Pede!" says I when I got back, "I fooled you!"

"By one eench!" says he, looking at my hat.

"Inch is as good as a mile, and that cussed noise is stopped for a while, anyhow."

A stone rattled back of us.

"Look to the doors, quick!" says Pedro.

We hopped to our places.

Plain Mary Smith

“Many coming down the hill!” says Gonzales.

It was n't that I had scared or impressed my friends by my oration that they had n't shot further; no, they simply took advantage of the opportunity to work a sneak on us from behind. I call that low-down. Howsomever, it did n't matter what I called it. They were at our back door, knocking hard.

Skipping gaily from tree to rock, they was full as well sheltered as we. Worst of all, when the store was built, the stones from the cellar had been placed in a row behind—not fifteen feet from the back door. There was no way under heaven we could keep them from lining up behind that stone wall, and hitting us all in a lump when they got ready.

We shut and barricaded the front door. That side of the store must take care of itself. We simply had to put all hands to meet the rush.

In a few minutes, stones, clubs, and a few shots fell on the front of the store, to draw us

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—this was the other lads, not the soldiers. Gonzales made a quick move, fired half a dozen shots in that direction, and then came back.

A white handkerchief on a stick waved behind the wall.

“We wish to talk!” said a voice.

“Talk later, we ’re busy now!” says Pedro.

“We shall spare your lives, if you yield the store. We only wish to destroy this because it belongs to Holton, who supports the iniquitous, the government that now is. On our word of honor, you shall live, if you yield the store.”

“Well,” whispered Pedro to us, “what do you say?”

“Tell him the fortune-teller fooled him,” says I.

“Tell him to go to hell,” says Gonzales.

“It is a trick,” says the other man.

“So think I,” says Pedro. He called aloud: “We are large healthy men. To make us live is necessary we have more than your word of

Plain Mary Smith

honor—do not play further, cowards that you are! The store you may have when we give it to you. We will kill you all—all!”

All four of us yelled and hooted at 'em. We were strung tight now. Thirty-odd men ready to climb at you, fifteen feet away, thirty or forty more all ready to whack at you from behind, takes the slack out.

There was just one second of hush, and then hell bu'st her b'iler. Lord! Lord! Of all the banging and yelling and smashing you ever did hear! Noise enough for Gettysburg. They come at us from all around. We scrambled like monkeys, shooting; jumping elsewhere; shooting again—zip, zip, zip—fast as you could clap your hands. They bored in so they could hammer on the door. I was helping there until I heard a crash from my window, and saw a head coming in. I caved that head with my rifle-barrel and fired into a swarm over the remains. They fired right back again; lead sung like a bees' nest. Flame and

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smoke spurted out all over. You could n't see any more in the store. I snapped at the crowd until I found there was no results, my magazine being empty; and, there scarcely being time to load, I poked 'em with the muzzle. In the middle of this razzle-dazzle come another crash and a flood of light. I saw the front door down; men tumbling through the opening.

I screeched to the other boys, grabbed cans of tomatoes, and pasted the heap. It sounds like a funny weapon, but I want you to understand that when an arm like mine heaves a quart can of tomatoes at you, some little time will pass before you see the joke. I hit one man under the nose and lifted him three feet.

I followed this up with a box in one lump, clubbed my rifle, and lit into 'em. It was then that one of our boys shot me in the leg by mistake. You could n't tell what you were doing. It was all a mess of noise and lunacy. The leg-shot brought me to my knees and the gang atop. I worked lively before I was free. Some-

Plain Mary Smith

how I got a knife—I 'll never tell for sure how, nor when. But at last I was loose with a crowd in front looking at me and calling for guns.

“Beel, Beel! Help!” called Pedro. How was I to help? The moment I turned my back that outfit would swarm in.

It was all over. I heard Gonzales curse above all the other noises. And then, as I stood there, sick, knowing I must drop in a minute, I saw a change on the faces in front of me. Things were swimming considerable and I smiled at my own foolishness. I must have lost sight for a second, for when I saw again, the crowd was leaving, tight as they could pelt.

As I gracefully put my ear in a spittoon, I heard a tremendous firing, and the next minute, through the doorway, beheld the soles of bare-footed soldiers' feet.

Somebody shook me by the shoulders. I came out of dreamland long enough to see Pedro with the tears running down his face.

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“Beel!” he screamed; “Beel! by the mercy of God, it is Señor Holton with men!”

Then his voice changed. “What ees eet? You are hurt, no?”

“No,” says I. “I just wanted to listen to the spittoon.”

I reckon that joke was too much for me, in my condition. It takes a strong man to stand the wear of things like that. Anyhow, my next appearance in active life found me all bandaged up neat as a Sailors’ Home, and a very nice-looking gentleman holding my wrist with one hand, with a glass of truck to throw into me in the other, and Jim was swearing a prayer to the doctor not to let me go.

“Oh, I was n’t thinking of going anywhere,” says I, to relieve his mind. “What are you laughing at? I was n’t.”

“That ’s right, Bill,” says Jim, taking my hand. “Just stay right here.”

The doctor fed me something that I felt clear

Plain Mary Smith

down to my toes, still keeping his hand on the wrist.

“Good!” says he. “The effect of shock is over—it ’s only the lost blood now—he must have lost a gallon, from his appearance.”

“Durn careless of me,” says I, still hazy. “But what in thunder am I doing here? What ’s all this about?”

“Lie down, Bill,” says Jim. “You have three knife-cuts and four bullet-holes in you.”

“I have?” says I, rousing up. “Well, then, why did n’t I holler for water?”

“You did,” says Jim.

“There, there!” says the doctor. “No more talk! Lie still, young man, and sleep, if you can.”

It was two days later when I got particulars: Seems I was out of my head for four hours, and like to die any minute; that I had a hole in the lower leg, another in the hip, a streak across the top of my head, and a bullet in the shoulder. Also a slash across the right hand, and

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another on the right forearm, and a stab in the same upper arm. I suppose that was during the hand-to-hand at the window and the door. I have a faint memory of getting the knife by pulling it out of my own arm. But the bullet-holes knocked me. I don't remember getting shot at all—only a dizziness when one man fired in my face. I guess that was the streak across the head.

I was the star performer. The other boys drew a couple of holes apiece or so. Gonzales was n't even laid up, though Pedro had his arm shattered.

Well, they kept me quiet, although I was crazy to talk. At the third day I demanded food, instead of swill. The doctor looked troubled and shook his head.

“See here, Doc,” says I, “how am I going to manufacture good new blood, without the raw material? Just let me have a half-a-dozen eggs and a hunk of bacon and a loaf of bread, and I 'll do credit to you.”

Plain Mary Smith

He snorted at the idea, but I begged so hard he says at last: "Well, all right; you are the toughest piece of humanity I ever struck; maybe it *will* do you good."

When I got outside that first square meal, William De La Tour Saunders felt less naked and ashamed inside of him, and proceeded to get better a mile a minute.

The fourth day I could sit up and hear Jim tell me all about it.

He had found a feller in the camp preaching revolution. For some time this had been expected. It was known that a General Zampeto was setting up for President, and it was also known that Belknap was backing him, although he took great care not to be mixed in it by name. But Zampeto and Belknap had fooled our crowd plenty, by being all ready for action when it was supposed they were just starting in.

When Jim caught and thumped that first revolutionist, he tumbled at once that things

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were about to boil, so he flew for help. His camp was a sort of turning-point. The two sides were about evenly divided as to forces, and, as Jim worked nearly three hundred men, it meant a great deal which side they fought on.

Jim's men were mainly peaceful, quiet fellows, like Gonzales and that other feller—(Pepe something-or-other—I don't know as I ever learned his full name)—and Jim had great authority with them. If the rebels smashed Jim on the start, his men would fall in on the winning side, or at worst remain neutral. Neither Zampeto nor Jim had the least idea they 'd fight hard—it was just the moral effect of it, and then, too, the supplies in the store were valuable.

Jim could have rounded up enough of the boys to lick the hide off this gang of rebels, if it was n't, as I said, that, knowing 'em to be nice quiet lads, like Pedro, he felt sure they 'd quit in a mess. “And never will I be such a fool as that again,” says Jim. “I knew you 'd give

Plain Mary Smith

'em war, but to think of Pedro! I told him to run and save himself!"

Our boys, being scattered and without a leader, simply had to submit to being chased out of the country. Chance led Gonzales and Pepe to fly to the store.

So much for us. No one knew what was doing in Panama. The country was full of rebels around us, and Jim found himself too busy gathering an army to ride to town and see.

He finally had some three or four hundred men, armed after a fashion, that he drilled from morning till night.

And here was I, stuck in bed! Doc would n't let me try the game leg, although I felt sure it would hold me.

"You stay there till I tell you," says he, "and then you 'll get up and be useful; if you try now, you 'll only go back again to be a nuisance to your friends."

He put it that way to make it a cinch I 'd

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stay. Nobody ever was kinder than him and the rest. Each day some one was with me to play cards, or checkers, or talk. Old Jim could n't do enough for me. I think he 'd spent all his time in the house if it was n't that he must take hold outside. "Boy, I know what you did for me," he said. "There ain't no use talking about it between us, but what I have is yours."

Just the same, I *knew* that leg was all right, so one day, when I found myself alone, I got up to walk to the water-pail. I laid down on the floor so hard I near bu'sted my nose. "Guess I don't want any drink," thinks I. "I 'll go to bed, instead." I could n't make that, neither. My arms only held me for a second, then they sprung out at the elbow. I sweat and swore at the cussed contraptions that would n't work. Tears of rage come free and fast. Them arms and legs of mine had served me so long, I could n't believe they 'd gone back on me like that, and I was so

Plain Mary Smith

ashamed to have the doctor come and ketch me that I flew into a fit, foamin' and fumin' and snarlin' like a trapped bear.

It was then the doctor entered on the scene. What he said was never intended to be repeated. Lord save us! He put my case in juicy words!

“Now, you red-headed young fool!” says he, as he rolled me in bed, “I want you to understand I 'd beat your head off, if you were a well man, for this trick!” He shook his fist under my nose. “Wait till you get up!” says he.

“Ain't I?” says I, feeling good-natured once more to see him in such a wax. “Ain't I waiting?”

“I won't talk to you!” says he, and slams himself out of the room.

XVI

RED PLAYS TRUMPS

THINGS went fast before I was around again. Jim met five hundred men sent out by Zampeto to clear the country, and killed or captured every man of 'em. The prisoners he penned close, but fed well, to teach 'em white ways.

Then he sent deceiving messengers back to Zampeto, to report how well the rebel army was doing. Victory kept perching on her standard till it was near worn out. But, all the same, another detachment, working to the east, to unite further south with the first body and sweep back toward the capital, would do excellently. The detachment was sent by Zampeto and gobbled the same as before. More victor-

Plain Mary Smith

ies were reported to the home rebel government, and assurances given that with another body, the three could descend on that part of the city held by Perez and Oriñez and crush it between their forces. Once more did Zampeto approve, to his bad fortune. And this did him up. It was all over with Belknap, Zampeto & Co., except the actual capture of their part of the town. They held Santa Ana and the church, the time-respected custom with revolutions.

Zampeto must have been a plumb fool. I saw him afterward—a fat, pompous man with a rolling, glaring eye. If Belknap had been able to step in, in person, we should n't have had a walk over; but while Zampeto was agreeable to advice in the beginning, he soon suffered from *cabeza grande*, which swell-headed state Jim's reports of victories raised to a fearful size, and Belknap could do nothing with him.

His losses were tremendous for that country,

Red Plays Trumps

and there he sat at home, serene in the belief of a conqueror! We had a cinch. Not a thing to do but chase them out of their holes!

I had my plans concerning Saxton and Mary, so Jim held the final attack on the city until I was able to ride. Then he sent word to Perez and our army started—not in mass, because somebody in the rebel army might have sense enough to scout a little, but by fives and tens, slipping along back ways and short cuts until Belknap and Zampeto were surrounded on the outside by two to one, and faced by an equal force in numbers, and a far superior in courage and ability, from within.

I got Oriñez and Perez to help me in the last act. We three wormed our way into the rebel town, early one morning, lying quiet in a cellar until evening came. Strange to say, the night before, Saxton met with an accident. I was handling a revolver and it went off, somehow or other, and burnt him across the back.

Plain Mary Smith

“Christopher Columbus, Bill!” says he, “what a careless cuss you are! You ’ve put me out of commission!” Gracious, but I was sorry! Yet, being the guilty party, I could n’t see where with decency I might do less than carry the word to Mary. That ’s one reason why we went into the rebels’ camp. The other had to do with Belknap. He was easily capable of explaining things to his own credit, as long as he did all the talking. Now I wanted a hand in the conversation. We hid in the trees back of the fountain. Soldiers came and went. Zampeto himself, looking like a traveling jewelry-store, made a visit, but all hands were so secure in the belief of the wonderful success of the cause that they never suspected the existence of three enemies in the same garden—or even in the same one hundred square miles, for the matter of that. At last we saw Belknap; he came to the door with Zampeto. Behind him we saw the women-folk. One looked like Mary, but I could n’t be sure. Every time

Red Plays Trumps

she moved somebody stuck his head in the way. At last Zampeto dropped something, and as he stooped to pick it up, I saw Mary plainly. She looked thin and worn, poor girl. Certain that both were in the house, I made a quick sneak across to the kitchen window, up the shutters, and in at a window on the second floor. Mary had told me the room Belknap kept as his private office. It was that window I went in.

I heard my man's heavy step in the hall, as I gathered myself. I heard Mary's voice answer him in a sad and lifeless tone. "I hope it will soon be over—it seems terrible, terrible! Although the end may be good." I heard her door shut, and, Belknap coming again, I got my gun ready, put on a bashful expression, and waited. I do not lie when I say that Mr. Belknap was astonished to find me in his private room. That expression was one of the few honest ones it had been my privilege to see upon his face.

Plain Mary Smith

“What are you doing here?” he asked, savage.

“Why, I only came to speak to Mary—to tell her about Mr. Saxton,” I stammered, shyly, knowing that Saxton’s name would wake him up.

“What about Saxton?” he asked, putting his wicked eye on me.

“Why, I want to tell Mary—I don’t like to say—”

“What!” he said, dropping the sound of his voice still further and sending the meaning of it high. “What? You come into my room and won’t answer my questions?” He took a quick cat-like step toward me. I saw I had a lively man to deal with, and, weak as I was, it stood me in hand to get ready. “There was a letter,” I mumbled, reaching in my pocket for my gun. With my hand on that, I changed my mind. “I guess I ought n’t to let you have it, Mr. Belknap,” I said.

He got gray around the mouth. “Give me

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that letter!" says he, in his strained whispering. "Give it to me, or, so help me God, I 'll kill you where you stand."

I jumped back, terrified. "You would n't hurt me?" I gasped. "I should n't give you the letter, sir; it was intended for Mary—please don't hurt me! I 've been sick!"

He drew a knife. "If you do not instantly hand me that letter," he says, and he meant every word of it, "I shall put this in your heart."

That was the justification I needed. It 's queer, but I never saw a man who did n't have to have an excuse. Belknap had *his*, I reckon.

We stood there, me quivering with fear, and his bad light eyes murderous on me, while slowly, slowly, I drew out . . . my gun.

"Now," whispers I, "you petrified hunk of hypocrisy, I 've got you! Hand me that knife!"

He could n't understand. He just stared. "Hand me that knife!" says I, letting what I felt become apparent. He passed over the

Plain Mary Smith

knife. With all his faults, he was too smart man not to know the fix he was in. Yet thought I 'd clinch it.

“Mr. Belknap,” says I, “your goose is cooked. The government army is right outside, as your people could have seen, if they 'd had the wit of a mud-turtle. I 've come into your lines prepared to do anything necessary as you can readily imagine. We 're going to have a little play-acting now, and you 're to guess your part. If you guess wrong— Well heaven has missed you for some time, and she sha'n't be defrauded any longer.”

His eyes flickered with fury. He could not have said a word to save him.

“Understand,” I whispers, “a crooked move and—*adios!*”

He understood. I kicked a table over and scuffled with my feet as if there was a row then lay down on the floor, where I could watch my man, and yelled quietly for help. Oriñez' head showed at the window. I signaled him

Red Plays Trumps

and he lay behind the shutter with his artillery trained on Belknap, the virtuous.

“Don’t cause me the great grief, Señor,” he whispers. Belknap turned and, seeing him, the life went out of his face.

I had n’t yelled loud enough to alarm the house. Only Mary’s quick feet responded to the call.

She, too, was a trifle surprised to find me lying on the floor in Belknap’s room.

“Save me, Mary!” I cried. “Save me!”

What ’s a little foolish pride when your friend’s good is at stake? Yet it hurt to do that.

“Why, Will! Mr. Belknap!” she cried, astonished. “Whatever is the matter? What does this mean?”

“I came to see you, Mary,” I said, almost crying, “and Mr. Belknap threatened to kill me.”

“To kill *you*, Will?” she said, in a voice that rang like a man’s. “To *kill* you?”

Plain Mary Smith

“Yes,” I said piteously. “And I ’m not fit to fight him—I ’ve been hurt—see my head, where I ’ve been shot.” I tore open my shirt sleeve. “See the cuts! and the bullet holes!”

“Oh, poor boy! poor, poor boy!” she said in such loving pity that I felt a skunk and had a mind to chuck the game. But it was out of my hands now. Mary sprang up and faced Belknap, so strong, graceful, and daring in her rage that I forgot my job in admiring her.

“Explain!” she said.

Belknap opened his mouth. Outside sounded a little click—like a creak in the shutter-hinge. No words came.

The blood flamed in her face. “Have you *nothing* to say to me, sir? I shall ask you once more what this poor wounded boy has done to you, that you propose to kill him?”

You never saw an uglier mug than Belknap’s in all your days, as it appeared then. Ordinarily, although I hate to say it, he was a fine-looking man, but now his face was so twisted

Red Plays Trumps

he looked like the devil in person. And still he said nothing. He had plenty good reason not to.

At this, Mary went at him. "I thought you a good man—a wise man," she said, with a bitter quiet that burnt, in every word. "You are a cowardly scoundrel. Attack the boy if you dare. I think I am a match for such as you."

And so help me John Rodgers, if she did n't catch up the heavy ruler from his desk and stand ready for him!

If I had the least remaining pity for Belknap, the look he threw at her finished it. He would have struck her if he could. I know it. The man was nothing but a rotten mess of selfishness.

"Bah!" says she, throwing down the ruler with disgust. "I am making much out of little. You are not worth notice."

She turned to me, all womanly gentleness and pity.

"Never mind, Will dear," she said. "You

Plain Mary Smith

are safe, he dare not touch you. What was it you risked your life to tell me?"

"Mary," I said, speaking very slowly, to make it sound its worst. "Arthur—is—shot."

She acted as if she was, too. I caught her just in time. She hung so for a moment, not fainting, but as lifeless.

"Now," she said, scarcely above a breath—"now, when I have just begun to see, it comes! And I have myself to thank for it."

She was so white it frightened me; besides, things were everlastingly sliding along with Bill.

"Oh, he 's not *dead!*" I explained, quickly. "He may n't even be badly hurt, but I felt sure you wanted to know."

Then the tears came. "Want to know?" she sobbed. "Of course I want to know. Oh, what a fool of a woman I 've been! And to think of your coming to tell me at the risk of your life! I have n't deserved it! Where is Arthur? Can we go there? Can we go, Will?"

Red Plays Trumps

You don't believe he 'll die? He must n't! He can't!"

Last I saw of Saxton he was chuckling merrily over the doctor's mistake concerning the value of aces up. Unless he 'd changed his mind in the meanwhile, he had n't the remotest intention of dying.

"It 's dodging through the lines, Mary, to get to him—risky."

She waved my objection off with an impatient hand, dried her eyes, and made ready.

"Come with me until I get some things together," she said, practical, in spite of her fire. I do sure like that combination.

"I 'll stay here," says I. "You won't hurt me now, will you, Mr. Belknap?" This I remarked in a very youthful, pleading tone.

He said, "No," after a struggle. It did n't sound like anything you ever heard from a human throat.

"I 'll just stay here," I said. I wanted a

Plain Mary Smith

word with the man. Mary looked doubtful for a moment, but at length left.

“Now, Belknap,” says I, when she was safely in her room, and me almighty glad to be my own self again, “because you ’ve been a friend of Mary’s—that is, because she thought you were—you go free, if you wish. When we leave we ’ll send you back a man. Take my advice and go with him—don’t get it into your fool head I ’m working a plant on you this time. You can guess what your carcass will be worth when we take the city. Our men are due here in minutes.”

He looked at me and ground his teeth—palsied with rage, shaking all over.

“Better do it,” I said.

And then came testimony: far-off firing, and yells.

“Our boys are closing in,” I told him. “That ’s them, now.”

The firing grew heavier and then quit. The yells increased.

Red Plays Trumps

Another look flashed on his face—fear. For a while I think the bigger man in him determined to stick it out, but fear drew the pot.

The change grew.

“Of course,” he said, “if I am to understand that you mean well by me—”

I cut him off.

“I don’t mean well by you. I despise you altogether. You get away safely because Mary thought once you were a friend. It ’s a fool notion that you can take advantage of, or not, as pleases you. I won’t attempt to disguise the fact that you are wanted bad by some of our side. Oriñez, there, would like to have your hide to remember you by.”

“*Si, Señor!*” says Oriñez from the window. “It is only that my word is given you are not dead now.”

There came another burst of firing, nearer. Another street taken.

“I agree,” said Belknap, and now he was anxious, fawning. “I can take a few belong-

Plain Mary Smith

ings? Trifles that I have picked up and wish to keep?"

"Leave your trifles and let them keep me," jeered Oriñez.

"You can take what you can carry," I answered, short.

"Thank you—thank you," he said hurriedly. "Would you mind if I asked you to leave me alone in the room? A stranger distracts one when it comes to what to leave and what to keep."

"We won't steal your darned money, even if we see it," I said. "You 'll have time after we leave to gather your wealth."

He bit his nails. "The time seems short," he said. The firing broke out nearer, and now you could hear our war-whoop. "Viva Perez! Down with the traitors!" Each side called the other traitors. "Perez" was the key to the party.

"Short or not, it 's what you get," I answered him. Mary left her room and the talk stopped.

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“I am ready,” she said.

I took her bundle and we started. At the head of the stairs she paused. “Will,” she said, “I hate that man; but as I hope to go to the happiness of my life, I will not leave him so.”

“Good for you!” says I.

She went in again and held out her hand.

“Mr. Belknap,” she said, “I wish no ill-will between us. Forgive me as fully as I forgive you.”

He was on pins and needles to get his money; to be rid of us.

“Certainly, my dear young lady!” says he with haste and effusion. “Certainly! Of course!” It meant nothing to him at all. And it meant a ton to Mary. She stared at him until I pulled her away. “Is that a sane man?” she asked me.

“I ’ve no time for conundrums,” I answered her. “We must be getting out of this.”

If I succeeded, I was to signal Perez. When we reached the garden, I could walk freely,

Plain Mary Smith

being in the company of the well-known Señorita Maria. I undid my neckerchief, shook it carelessly, and Perez was off, to bring Arthur by any kind of method to the arranged meeting-place.

Oriñez struck off ahead to scout for possible danger.

There was none. We had n't gone five squares before we ran into panic-stricken rebels, and the firing-line was approaching on the jump.

Not wanting Mary to see the wounded men, and not caring to explain just then why I could n't have waited an hour or two for my message, I took the back way.

We landed at the little ruined stone house before Saxton and Perez; they had much farther to travel.

"We must wait here," I told Mary.

"Must we?" she asked pitifully. "Can't we go on?"

"Now, my dear girl, see here," says I, in a

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fatherly manner, "after I 've tried to do the best—"

"Yes, dear, yes—I 'm ungrateful, I know." She cried a little. "But I 've been such a fool! You 're *sure* he is n't dangerously hurt?"

"Why, it may be," says I, with a wave of my hand, "that he 's up and around! I don't know much about these things, you know. I 'm scart easy."

Then she petted me and said I had a wise reason, she was sure, and if it was dangerous to go on, she would n't, and she 'd be patient, and she was all worn out and she looked a fright, and *what* a fool she had been! And she cried some more.

I heard a step. I 'd strained my ears for it for the last twenty minutes. "Now," I says to her, "I 'll skip out to see what 's doing."

I slid behind a tree in time to prevent Sax from seeing me. Perez was on the hill waving his hands for joy. I felt pretty dum joyous myself, hiding in the brush with the lovely

Plain Mary Smith

feeling of putting through a thoroughly successful put-up job added to the other.

Dead silence after Saxton stepped within the little house. Then come one cry—"Arthur!"

The whole business, from the cradle to the grave, was done up in one small word.

Perez come down the hill; I left my brush-pile. Arthur and Mary were sitting on the stone step, hand in hand. I 'll bet they never said a word after that first cry, and they held hands like they was afraid to let go, even for a minute. I thought we 'd have lots of explaining to do, but shucks! They did n't want any explanations. There they were, sitting on the door-step, hand in hand. Good enough old explanation for anybody.

They did n't even see us.

I raised my voice, calling to Perez, "Your Excellency, I have the honor to report Panama has fallen!"

And there they sat, hand in hand. They did n't even hear us, neither.

